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THE HOUSE OF DELUSION

The House of Delusion

By

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*Author of "The Man in the Moonlight,"
"The Panelled Room," etc.*

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To
EDWIN ROULETTE KEEDY

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The House of Delusion

I

THE RETURN OF THE GOLDEN UNCLE

MANY things combined to make Melchior Pryde decide to close his Italian villa at Fiesole, high above the small, but beautiful, Arno, and return to his ancestral home in America. He was a little disturbed at the thought of such a change of residence for a man who had left his sixtieth milestone some years behind him; but he had reasons that, on mature deliberation, appeared to him to outweigh any apprehensions. He had been away from the United States for a long time, and during his absence the deaths of many of his own generation had left him the head of the house of Pryde, with nephews and nieces to whom he was only a name. He ought to know these children of his brother and sisters. They ought to know him. He wanted their affection. He didn't relish the idea of being known to them only as an expatriate uncle, who set no value on family ties.

He extremely liked physical comfort and a placid state of mind,—as was perhaps natural in a man who had in his early youth inherited a considerable fortune from a great-aunt who had regarded him as her pet,—but the constant threat of strikes and social revolutions in Italy made residence there a less peaceful existence than it had formerly been. Europe was becoming volcanic. He visioned America as a place where an elderly man might manage to ignore the pin-pricks of the times.

And at bottom there was a love of his native land, which he did not express to himself, but which was in reality a vital, integral factor in his ultimate decision. He had always intended to go home some day, although he had postponed the going as regularly as the years arrived. Certainly an old man ought to go home before he left his terrestrial abode; he ought to have his own flag flying in his last days. He pictured the old house,—Hillcrest; on the outskirts of Philadelphia,—that had belonged to his father and his grandfather; and he felt he must see it again, live again within its walls and walk under its oaks and maples.

Finally he would be able to take something of his beloved Fiesolan villa back to the States with him. Ambrose Tyrrel, his friend, and Antonio Poppi, his body-servant, would keep him company. For a number of years Tyrrel, an Englishman, had shared

Pryde's rooftree and table and been like a brother to him. Pryde had never married, and Tyrrel had been a widower for some time before the two had met at the house of a mutual acquaintance in Florence. They had taken a liking to each other from the start. Tyrrel was interested in antiquarian lore,—more especially in the histories of various mediæval Italian families,—and had a calm and philosophic turn of mind that stimulated and soothed the older man. Pryde shrank from the notion of parting with this companion.

“And now, Ambrose,” Pryde said one summer evening, when he had told his friend of his thought of returning to America, “what would you do if I went? I can't cast off our close bonds lightly. I don't know much about these young relatives of mine in the States, but I do know you, old man.”

“Well, Melchior, I don't know what I'd do,” Tyrrel confessed.

“Why shouldn't you come with me, for a trial?” Pryde jumped at the other's apparent lack of decision. “I may not stay there, after all. . . . Or, of course, I may. But if, after you've been over there a while, you find that you don't like it, you must feel entirely free to leave. I don't want to be urgent. . . .”

Tyrrel, a tall, dark man, with a slightly aquiline nose and fine, intelligent eyes, took several turns up and down the living-room, his hands clasped behind his

back, his favorite attitude. Meanwhile Pryde watched his friend with an almost boyish eager intentness.

"I don't want to overpersuade you," Pryde repeated.

Nevertheless it was entirely clear what he hoped that Tyrrel would say.

And Tyrrel didn't disappoint him. "Why, Melchior," he said, halting and smiling, "if my company would really give you pleasure ——"

"It would, it would, Ambrose!"

So that matter was settled.

As for Antonio Poppi,—Pryde's valet and majordomo,—the American admitted to himself that things would be at sixes and sevens with him if he had to do without the fellow. Antonio knew, from a ten years' acquaintance, all his master's habits and little idiosyncrasies, and habits and little idiosyncrasies played an important part in Pryde's life. A perfect servant, Antonio had no ties of his own. Sometimes, when Pryde read in the newspapers of the so-called rights of the working classes, how those classes were demanding this and striking to obtain that, he felt that he ought to have Poppi placed in a museum, to serve as a specimen of what a perfect servant should be.

When Antonio said that he would go with his master to the United States, Pryde considered that the last barrier to his return was removed. Antonio would

fit into the life of Hillcrest as he had fitted into it at the villa, oiling the machinery of daily contacts so that it should run without friction. And with Ambrose Tyrrel, to boot,—well, the change in residence would not be nearly so revolutionary as it might have been.

To Pryde's relatives in America the return of their Uncle Melchior was a red-letter event. To most of them he had practically become a myth, a golden myth, as it were; a romantic figure concerning whom they could tell big tales to their friends. "My rich Uncle Melchior Pryde, who lives in Italy,"—or "My mother's brother, who has a beautiful villa outside Florence,"—that was the way they spoke. They knew they were going to like him; they were going to be very, very devoted to him; they would show that they looked upon him as the source of all grace.

Josephine Fount, one of Pryde's three nieces, the extremely capable wife of Hamilton Fount, vice president of a trust company, undertook to make Hillcrest ready for occupancy. She had it cleaned from cellar to garret, and installed a complete staff of servants, headed by Bramwell, the butler, and Mrs. Shanklin, the housekeeper.

There was quite a collection of nephews and nieces at the railroad station to greet the travelers when their train rolled in. They dispersed their several ways after their warm welcome, assuring their Uncle Mel

that they would see him that evening. It was Mrs. Fount who drove out to Hillcrest with the two gentlemen and Poppi, and she who witnessed Pryde's fresh delight in the beautiful autumnal tints of the trees and the handsome front of his house.

In the hall Hamilton Fount, who had hurried from his office, gave each of the gentlemen a hearty handshake, although one that made Pryde wince a trifle. "And this," said Fount, turning from the pink-cheeked Pryde to the dark-skinned Tyrrel, "is our Uncle Melchior's friend, his fidus Achates? Well, sir, I'm glad to meet you. If there's anything I can do to make your stay here comfortable, you've only to drop the hint. Always at your service, sir, in big or little matters."

Exactly the words and the manner, it may be noted in passing, that Hamilton Fount used when a new depositor opened an account with him.

Tyrrel was not loquacious. "You're very kind, Mr. Fount," he said. And when he had left the banker hanging in the air, as it were, expecting further words, he smiled in his amiable way and walked, hands behind his back, to a mezzotint on the wall, which he studied with great care.

In contrast to the Founts, who were both full-bodied, hearty, and genial people, was Wykoff Jay, a nephew, who came in when the household was half

through dinner. Elegance was Jay's watchword. It spoke from his thin, aristocratic features, his impeccable clothes, his languid manner. "Ah, Uncle Mel," he said, "you've washed off the stains of travel? Are they doing you well, Mr. Tyrrel?" And when he had sat down, he added, "Well, I warn you, sir, this crowd of young hopefuls is prepared to eat you alive; they're hungry for you. They only gave you a taste of what's coming when they met you at the station. I see that the good Hamilton has brought over some of his madeira. Yes, I will have a glass. . . . No, thanks; none of the salad. I dined early in town so as to get here ahead of the gang."

A chatty, humorous fellow; not particularly congenial to the Founts; but amusing to Pryde and Tyrrel, whose tastes were more catholic. Tyrrel lifted his glass. "Your good health, Mr. Jay."

"Ah, yes. And yours, Mr. Tyrrel. I've guest cards for you both at the Adelphi Club. Funny old place it is, but excellent eating."

Jay contrived to put a temporary damper on the Founts, but he was not allowed to monopolize the attention of his uncle for long. Coffee and cigarettes were being served when Clarice Pryde, daughter of Melchior's only brother, arrived with Ralph Miles, another of Melchior's nephews. They had been at the railroad station, but had hardly had the opportunity

amid all that bustle to present themselves properly to the new-found head of the house. Clarice was a good-looking, fair-haired girl of twenty-five or so, who enjoyed the independence of a little apartment of her own in town. Miles was a big, burly fellow, tanned and weather-beaten, with the hearty manner of a patron of outdoor sports.

"And still they come!" chuckled Wykoff Jay when, a few minutes later, a third nephew, Nelson Lombard, marched into the dining-room. He was a handsome man, sanguine-colored, with close-cropped, curly reddish-brown hair. A broker, his bearing was easy and optimistic. He helped himself to a glass of wine and a long cigar. But the cigar was no more than lighted when the butler announced Mr. and Mrs. Amory Harper.

Marian Harper, Pryde's third niece, midway in age between Mrs. Fount and Clarice, swept lightly up to her uncle and kissed him on either cheek and on the crown of his gray-haired head. Tall, slender and dark, with lovely, luminous brown eyes, she was the acknowledged beauty of the family connection. Her husband, a rather dried up and wizened-looking person, contented himself with a birdlike nod and a frosty smile all round.

And last came Pryde's youngest nephew, Peter Kelley,—known in the family as Pip,—a pale and high-

strung youth, who had studied art in Paris and was trying to make a living by painting portraits of society women that should please their vanity rather than tell the truth, an occupation fit to worry a spirit far more stalwart than Kelley's.

"There they are, Uncle Mel," said Wykoff Jay; "all our men and women,—four nephews and three nieces, with two attendant husbands. And all of them more than glad to welcome you home again."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Nelson Lombard, drumming on the mahogany table. "Our prodigal uncle returned to the bosom of his doting family. Bring on the fatted calf!"

Pryde looked at the circle of faces, and his blue eyes shone a trifle mistily. It was worth making a sacrifice to see these scions of his own flesh and blood again. He turned to Tyrrel. "Well, Ambrose, this is warming, isn't it? A good deal more exciting than our quiet nights at the villa?"

"It's a family to be proud of, Melchior," said Tyrrel with a nod. His eyes twinkled as he looked at the company. "And though, as Mr. Lombard suggests, your uncle may have been prodigal and sowed some wild oats in Italy, I can assure you he's entirely worthy of his nieces and nephews."

There was a babel of voices, above which Marian Harper's soprano emerged. "Josephine Fount may

look after your material comfort, Uncle Melchior, but I intend to see to the social side. We've taken a box at the opera, with you in mind ——"

"I don't believe he cares for the opera," broke in Miles. "How about some hunting, Uncle? I can get you a first-class mount."

"Ah, ha," said Jay. "You see, you see, sir! They'll do every kind of thing to you except leave you in peace. Peter Kelley'll want to put you on canvas, Nelson is hankering to treble your income. Take my advice, Uncle Mel, and make me your guardian. Or make Clarice; she's a quiet sort."

Pryde turned to the fair-haired girl, who sat in a high-backed chair a little withdrawn from the table. "Yes, Clarice. . . . My dear, you remind me of your father. . . . You've the same broad brow. I think I should like to put myself in your charge."

"She's very modern," warned Marian Harper. "She goes in for all kinds of new ideas."

Clarice rose, and going over to her uncle, whispered something in his ear. Pryde caught her hand and held it tight for a moment. "Yes, yes, I think we shall get on excellently," he murmured. "Sit down by Mr. Tyrrel and tell him some of these new ideas. One of the reasons he and I came to America was to learn them."

"And that reminds me," said Hamilton Fount pom-

pously. "I mentioned the fact of Mr. Pryde's return after a lengthy residence in Italy to several newspaper men, and they told me they'd like to get his views on conditions over there."

"Good enough!" mocked Jay. "Let me introduce Cousin Hamilton in his rôle of publicity agent for our uncle."

"Conditions in Italy, as I understand them——" went on the steam-roller Fount.

"Are among the reasons why I left there," interrupted Pryde with a smile. He held up his hands in good-humored defense. "No, no, my dear children, I have reached an age when I don't give interviews. I want to be comfortable. I don't want any society except the group of you here. I want you all to consider Hillcrest your home;—come and go as you like,—drop in to breakfast or luncheon or dinner, stay overnight any time,—keep me company, in short. And if you'll do that, I'll surely have sufficient diversion." A smile played over his lips. "The Founts will see that I'm well fed. Peter Kelley will tell me of art. Ralph Miles will take me to walk. Marian to amuse me and Clarice to spoil me. Wykoff—ah, he's in the nature of a cocktail to stimulate my digestion. And Nelson.
. . . Now, sir, what the dickens are you?"

"The trouble-maker," grinned Lombard. "Every complete family ought to have one."

Tyrrel had been following the catalogue and regarding each one as Pryde singled them out. "You've got them all ticketed, Melchior," he now observed, "with the exception of Mr. Harper."

The eyes of all in the room turned to where the gentleman mentioned sat, on the outskirts of the group, near the door to the hall. He had so far contributed nothing to the conversation, and now a slight flush rose in his cheeks at being thus singled out.

"Yes, that's so,—as Mr. Tyrrel says." Apparently Harper felt that he must say something. "Where do I come in?"

Jay took him up at once. "That's an important question," he drawled. "It might be argued that you come in solely on account of being Marian's husband."

"No, no," broke in Ralph Miles. "Amory is the yardstick by which all the rest of us measure our shortcomings."

There were chuckles and grins. Harper's cheekbones showed two bright patches of pink.

"Ralph must have his little joke," said Pryde kindly.

"Mr. Harper, I hope you don't undertake to keep the consciences of all this interesting family?" Tyrrel suggested, with a magisterial air.

Marian Harper glanced at Lombard, a fleeting flash from her brown eyes to a face that was watching hers.

"I do not," said Harper decidedly.

"A wise man," Tyrrel assented. "I have always been given to understand that that was a thankless job,—especially in the case of ladies."

A silence fell, a slightly awkward stillness, as if every one present felt a certain embarrassment. Jay looked at Tyrrel with a sudden, new interest. Then he gave a short laugh.

"Human nature, Uncle Mel, is a delicious study, isn't it? I'll guarantee you'll find us all very human. Try to make the best of it."

"Don't be horrid, Wykoff!" protested Mrs. Fount.

Somebody laughed,—Josephine looked so angry,—and then they all, as if in relief from something disturbing, joined in a chorus of many-keyed merriment.

Under cover of the chorus Pryde glanced at his old friend, as though seeking some reassurance. Tyrrel, however, was smiling with the rest, enjoying the comedy that played around the table.

Later the two friends stopped in the library on the second floor for a few words before going to bed. An autumnal fire was burning on the hearth. The chairs, the divan, everything in the room bespoke the utmost comfort.

"Well, Ambrose," said Pryde, "you've met the family, passed them in review. Isn't it odd that an

old codger like me, who has lived so long with only you and Antonio, should suddenly find himself with such an interesting crowd on his hands? ”

“ It’s something new for you, Melchior. Luckily your shoulders are broad.”

Pryde twisted in his chair. “ You don’t find anything—er, anything disquieting about them, do you? ”

“ That fellow Wykoff Jay is a bit of a philosopher,” Tyrrel ruminated. “ What he said about human nature rather appealed to me. More particularly as bearing on your present situation.”

“ I don’t think I quite get you, Ambrose.”

Tyrrel nodded, absently, occupied with his own thoughts. “ Human nature is made up of all sorts of odd motives. When a number of people are brought close together those motives stand out in relief and furnish us with drama,—melodrama, comedy, tragedy, depending on circumstances. Up to now, Melchior, you have been singularly free from all such experiences. I doubt whether I have ever given you cause for a moment’s uneasy thought.”

“ Well, surely,” said Pryde, with a chuckle, “ I can’t complain that my nieces and nephews are human. There’s Clarice,—a lovely girl. You liked her, Ambrose? ”

“ Very much. Understand me, please; I didn’t mean to imply that I disliked any of them.”

“Peter Kelley is artistic,” the older man reflected; “I don’t understand the artistic temperament. Ralph Miles is more in my line, obvious and cheerful; and so is Wykoff Jay, an original, the type we have met in Florence. Yes, I shall like those three, I’m certain;—Clarice and Ralph and Wykoff. Harper’s a rather odd fish. Did he strike you as being somewhat put upon by the rest?”

“A gloomy-eyed man with a handsome wife.” Tyrrel was drawing patterns on the arm of his chair with his long forefinger.

“What’s that? Oh yes, Marian is handsome.”

“Your nephew Nelson Lombard reminded me of some of the Renaissance portraits,—probably the short, curling hair and the full, self-indulgent lips.”

“You see everything, Ambrose.”

“And you take it in bit by bit, Melchior. Well, I’ll admit that your course is calculated to provide you with more surprises.”

They were interrupted by Mrs. Fount.

“I wanted to tell you, Uncle, that Hamilton and I are going to stay here at Hillcrest for a few days, long enough to see that the house is running smoothly. We do want you to like things here.”

“Josephine, you’ve been more than kind.”

Mrs. Fount contrived to perch on the arm of Pryde’s chair. She patted her uncle’s shoulder. “We’re

really not such a bad lot. Of course Wykoff has to have his jokes; and some of them aren't what I call in very good taste. However ——"

Pryde looked beyond her at the open door. "Thank you, Antonio; I shan't want you again to-night."

Mrs. Fount gave a shiver. "Good gracious! How soft-footed that Italian is! I didn't know he was there."

"Ah, Josephine my dear, Antonio is everywhere at all times. I find him indispensable."

"Oh, I dare say I'll get used to him presently. I like to hear the servants. What was I saying? . . . Oh, warning you against Wykoff."

"I'm warned, my dear. Go to bed. I'm completely comfortable."

Over Pryde's head Josephine glanced at Tyrrel. That gentleman was gazing into the fire, a smile on his lips.

She hovered a minute, gave her uncle's arm a squeeze, and stole, half-reluctantly, out of the library.

Slowly Pryde turned to his friend, as though with some doubt in his mind. "Ambrose, what was the meaning of that?"

"Of what?"

"Why did she want to warn me against Wykoff?"

The other man rose. He appeared very tall and slender, his hands caught behind his back. He looked

down at Pryde. "If we begin to strip the masks from our companions, Melchior, where would it end? I might make a try at it from what I've seen since I've been here; but would you really want me to attempt it?"

Pryde shrank up. "No, no. You're keen; I know you're extremely keen. . . . But this is my own family."

"Yes, it is, your own family," Tyrrel agreed with an amiable bow. "And I hope you're going to enjoy the family. I myself thoroughly expect to."

"I'm glad you like them," Pryde said eagerly.

Tyrrel shrugged his shoulders. "A fascinating lot—with infinite possibilities," he said aloud. But what those possibilities might be he did not attempt to define.

II

WYKOFF JAY MAKES A PROPOSITION

MARIAN HARPER and her cousin Wykoff Jay were smoking cigarettes in the library at Hillcrest on a Sunday afternoon in October. There was something in common between the beautiful woman and the worldly-eyed, cynical man,—a desire for pleasure, accompanied by a dislike to pay the price their pleasures sometimes demanded. Each knew the other well. Brought up in the same social circle, they had had plenty of opportunity to test each other's shortcomings. The result was a camaraderie that allowed them to talk freely, without the barriers between them that more scrupulous friends erect.

Mr. Pryde had been with them three weeks, and it was of him that Jay, sitting on the divan in front of the great fireplace, was at the moment speaking. "It's very pretty of you, my dear, to trot out all your charities and altruistic impulses for our uncle's delectation, but he's no fool, you know. Uncle Mel is certainly nobody's fool. He's enjoying himself in the midst of his loving nephews and nieces; but I haven't as yet observed him scattering any largesse among

them. Nelson now — . . . He's had a chance with his talk about stocks and bonds as good investments." Jay shook his head. "But no, no; I don't believe Uncle Mel has given him a single commission."

Marian tossed her head. "Oh, Nelson's all right; he isn't in any hurry. He's doing very well at present." She knocked the ash from her cigarette into a copper jar at the end of the divan. "Our uncle seems to have taken quite a fancy to Amory."

"Odd, isn't it?" Jay patted her hand. "But don't let that disturb you. In the sight of the law Amory and you are one. And what your own beautiful orbs mayn't be able to accomplish, the intelligent stare of your better half may win."

"Wykoff, you're a wretch. I believe you devote yourself to prying into people's secrets."

"Some don't require much prying, my dear cousin."

Marian hesitated, then broke into a little laugh, as if she really enjoyed the situation.

"That's right," said Jay. "The wise woman always laughs with the serpent. I make a fairly presentable serpent, don't I? And I'll tell you something else. I don't believe our Uncle Mel is half the Puritan he looks."

"You surprise me!" Marian pretended dismay. "Have you found out his secret too?"

"He has a lenient eye. Remember that he has lived

in Italy the better part of his days, and our little peccadilloes seem utterly trivial to the well-bred Latins. And there's his stealthy man Antonio;—what a fellow to arrange a secret assignation; or any other business requiring quiet tact. There's a man for a crime. And our uncle loves him."

"You'll have me frightened next!" Marian made a gesture of glancing over her shoulder. "Josephine says she finds Poppi positively spooky."

"Oh, Josephine! Those stout women always shake with fear when they hear two leaves brush together. A guilty conscience;—the crime of growing fat."

Marian extinguished her cigarette and slowly stood up. "Well, I fancy that's all the Founts will ever be guilty of. Bourgeois. Ugh. They hang about Uncle Mel like a couple of leeches."

"They'll overdo it; never fear. I see signs already that he's growing weary of them. The trouble with them is that their sins aren't picturesque ones."

Marian gave him a smile, that dazzling one some men found heady. "You believe in audacity, don't you? So do I. It's the only thing that pays."

"I believe you, my dear. And I intend to act on that suggestion."

Standing in front of him, she stared at him a moment, evidently appraising him.

"You mean you'll tell Uncle Melchior that you're

short of the market and have got to have ten thousand dollars? ”

“ Not at all. I have no intention of boring him with my affairs.”

“ What then? ”

“ Audacity, I said ; not imbecility.”

She shrugged and started away. .

His hand shot out, caught her wrist, turned her back again to him. He whispered:

“ Where did you hear about that? ”

“ From Nelson,” she answered promptly. “ He knows what you do. I don’t know how he heard it.”

“ Well, if either Nelson or you speak about this ——”

“ You’re hurting my wrist. Let go. Of course we shan’t.”

“ No, I don’t think you will. Glass houses, my dear ——”

At a little distance from him she smiled. “ Poor old Wykoff! So he’s burnt his fingers? Why don’t you ask Hamilton Fount to get the money for you? He has the run of his bank.”

“ Why shouldn’t I ask Nelson? ” Jay parried. “ He’s playing in luck nowadays.”

She waved him a playful hand. “ They’re having tea down-stairs, and if I stay any longer with you up here Amory will be growing jealous.”

Jay knew that Harper was capable of becoming jealous of any one, where his wife was concerned; but he ventured to think that Marian's husband would be less disturbed at her having a tête-à-tête with him than with any other man in the house, her uncle alone excepted. To that extent Jay admired Harper's judgment; otherwise he thought him a good deal of a fool. The marriage had been a barter; Marian eight years earlier had been the most beautiful and amusing of her débutante set; Harper, considerably older than she, had high social position and was supposed to be rich. His wealth had turned out to be less than had been expected, his social position had apparently barred its owner from making any money. That was the situation, and all Jay's sympathies were on the side of the wife.

When Marian had left him Jay lighted a fresh cigarette and walked to the opposite end of the library, where a big bay window looked out at the autumn-red trees. Standing there, one knee propped on the long, leather-cushioned seat, he could see the wide brick terrace on which his uncle's Sunday party were now having tea. The day was warm for October, and Melchior Pryde, used to the balmy airs of Italy, was fond of being outdoors.

They made an interesting group. Josephine Fount, in a mauve gown, with square-cut neck and flowing

sleeves, sat at a wicker table, on which was placed the ancestral Pryde tea service, polished until the silver fairly glittered. Josephine had seen to that; she had had servants burnishing everything at Hillcrest; it was part of her idea of efficient housekeeping. Near her, in a basket chair, lounged Ambrose Tyrrel, one long leg looped over the other, exposing a great expanse of white gaiter. He was chatting with Clarice, who looked very fresh and dainty in a soft straw-colored frock.

And Jay, whose thoughts were constantly seeking out motives, considered: "Has he taken a fancy to Clarice? . . . No, no. He's not so old as Uncle Mel, but still he's all of fifty. Reflective, imaginative; but certainly not ardent. An eye to a pretty girl,—oh, yes, doubtless;—but that is all."

He saw Marian come out, stop for a moment by her uncle's chair—Pryde was talking to Fount and Miles, or rather was being talked to, for those two forceful gentlemen were arguing under his nose,—drift to a settee at a little distance where Peter Kelley, teacup poised on a knee, was lost in moody thought. He saw Marian rouse the young fellow and send him for a cup of tea. And before Kelley returned Nelson Lombard had stepped through a French window and calmly preëmpted the cushioned seat by Marian's side.

Amory Harper was missing. "I guess he's fed up

with this sort of thing," thought Jay. "Or is he merely playing his own hand? Does he think Uncle Mel will soon find the crowd too sweet and turn to a sterner type? Amory mayn't be such a fool as we think; he may get himself written into the good books ahead of all the rest. The hardly-used husband! And yet I can't see Uncle Mel falling for that pose. No, by Gad, I think he'd prefer a fighter." Jay turned. "What's that?" he muttered. "Good Lord, man, you go about like a cat!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," came the soft tones of Antonio Poppi. "I didn't know any one was at the window." His black eyes looked steadily at the surprised Jay. "I came for the newspaper, sir. Mr. Pryde asked me to get it."

"On the table." Jay regarded the servant. "It's customary in this country to knock or cough or do something before you enter a room."

"I'm sorry, sir, if I disturbed you. It shan't happen again."

Antonio went out, leaving Jay frowning. "Confound the fellow!" he thought. "Josephine was right. He does make one jumpy." He tiptoed over the rug to the hall door. Poppi was treading noiselessly across the polished floor to the staircase.

Back again at the window, Jay saw the tea party dissolving. Clarice and Tyrrel were strolling along

the path that led to the formal garden. Pryde had young Kelley by the arm and was watching the sunset from the west end of the terrace. Ralph Miles had disturbed the two on the settee. Fount, tossing his napkin to his wife, who still sat at the tea-table like a statue of propriety, went in at the house door.

Jay lighted a third cigarette with fingers that trembled a bit, and sat down in the deep divan that fronted the marble fireplace. He picked up a book, but didn't read. And presently the stalwart figure of Fount appeared in the doorway and the banker said, "You here, Wykoff? I'm looking for one of Uncle Melchior's excellent cigars."

"Help yourself," welcomed Jay; and the other man proceeded across the library to a stand at one side where a dark-hued box of rosewood stood invitingly open.

Jay glanced around the room. The door to the right of the fireplace was closed; it led, as he knew, to a passageway that connected with the servants' quarters. A door, midway of the library on the opposite side, also closed, opened into a large closet, and against this at present was set a massive revolving globe. Only the door by which Fount had entered was open, and Jay, rising easily, crossed and shut this.

"What's the matter, Wykoff?" asked Fount.

“ Draughts; I’ve a nasty cold. Here’s a box of matches;—catch.”

Fount caught the little box, lighted his cigar, and turned to the divan. “ If you’d take decent care of yourself you wouldn’t get so squeamish at every little bit of fresh air. Take a cold bath, as I do; fifteen minutes of setting-up drill night and morning; cut out the drink ——”

“ Yes, yes, I know all about that. Sit down, Hamilton; I want a word with you.”

Fount obeyed; there was a strident little note in the voice of the exquisite Jay that somehow compelled obedience. But as he sat down the large man flipped the lapel of his well-cut morning coat back, as if he intended the resulting display of red silk scarf and pearl pin to indicate a well-disposed-to-all-the-world frame of mind.

“ Money matters, Wykoff? ”

“ In a way, yes. I do need a little money rather badly, as it happens.”

Fount let his hand rest on the upholstered arm of the divan, Uncle Melchior’s excellent cigar held between his fingers,—the attitude of a man of affairs about to be photographed.

“ What’s your security? ” he inquired.

“ That,” said Jay, “ is rather a delicate matter. It was, in fact, the reason why I closed the door.”

"As you know very well, Wykoff, I never mix in what we may call—for want of a better term—questionable dealings."

"But you did once, didn't you, old man? . . . Quite a time ago. The year before you got married."

Silence followed, broken only by the ticking of a grandfather's clock in a distant corner.

"I don't think I understand you, Wykoff," came presently from Fount in a haughty bass.

Jay reached his hand into his inside coat pocket, drew out a black leather card-case, and from that took a small slip of paper. "June, 1912. The Endicott Estate. Madison Trust Company." These items he murmured. "Mere memoranda, old man. But from such little things the intelligent mind can reconstruct the whole."

Fount drew away slightly. "The trust company you mention was closed up years ago. Its business was taken over by the Artisans and Tradesmen's."

"Yes;—but, Hamilton, you do remember that curious little affair of the Endicott Estate, don't you?"

Fount stood up. His face was more than usually red, and small veins showed on his forehead. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd think you were intentionally trying to be disagreeable,—on my word, I would. Asking if I remember 'curious little affairs!'

I don't consider this friendly of you, Wykoff. No, by George, I don't."

"But as you do know me so well, you must also know that my motive in speaking is entirely friendly. I don't want to bore you with details. Moreover, a little reflection on your part will surely supply what's lacking. No, I was merely thinking that you, as a trusted officer of your present bank"—he emphasized the word "present"—"would certainly be in a position to favor me with a loan. I only need ten thousand dollars. And only as a loan; remember that. Till this crazy market gets right again."

"You should have come to me for advice about the market," said Fount severely.

"I know I should. But as I didn't, I'm coming to you now. You're a man who deals in money. I'm a man who only deals in—how shall I put it?—tips. My tip about the affair of the Endicott Estate against your money,—your loan, I mean to say. How does that strike you, my boy?"

"To be entirely frank, it doesn't strike me at all favorably, Wykoff. I abominate tips."

"You do? I'm sorry. I rather thought you'd see it as a sporting proposition. However, perhaps you will when you've turned it over in your mind. There's no hurry, of course. We can continue the subject in here later this evening." Jay also rose. "I say, old

man, you and Josephine have certainly done well by Uncle Mel. You ought to stand high in his books."

"Josephine is naturally devoted to him," Fount responded, a trifle absently. "She wants him to like his old home."

"She knows her business—of home-making," said Jay. "Lucky man, to have won such a jewel!"

"Yes, yes, of course. . . . I must get ready for supper." Fount went to the door. "By the way," he added, his hand on the knob, "just you remember, Wykoff, that tips are dangerous things. Sometimes they act like boomerangs."

Jay, again alone in the library, directed a grimace at a leering Japanese mask that hung above a bookcase. "Our good banker doesn't like to remember the time when he wasn't quite so well fixed as he is now," he reflected. "But contrition is good for the soul;—and I must lay my fingers on ten thousand dollars."

He looked at his watch; it was almost the hour when Melchior Pryde served an informal Sunday supper. Feeling rather warm, for there had been a certain tensivity to his recent interview with Fount, Jay opened one of the windows and let the breeze blow on his face. Marian Harper and Lombard were still talking on the terrace; but the rest of the group had disappeared.

Cooled and at ease, Jay left the library. As he crossed the wide upper hall to the staircase he saw

Clarice coming out from a bedroom that had been taken possession of by Mrs. Fount. "Prinking?" he asked, shaking an admonitory finger. "I saw you carrying Tyrrel off for a séance in the garden."

Clarice flushed easily, which was one of the chief reasons why Jay liked to tease her.

"He wanted to see the chrysanthemums," she answered. "I like him. He appreciates nice things."

"That's what I thought when I saw him with you."

"Wykoff, be quiet! Suppose he should hear you."

"He's not hidden around here, is he?" Jay made a pretense of scanning the length of the hall.

"I don't know where he is. Pip came along with something to tell me—in private."

"Pip hasn't gotten into trouble with any of his lovely models?"

"I shan't tell you a thing. You're one of those people who are always trying to put two and two together. And half the time you find they make three or five."

"Oh, my dear girl, you don't do me justice."

But Clarice, pretending displeasure, went down the stairs, and Jay, pretending humility, was obliged to follow.

During supper Amory Harper arrived, explaining that he had been occupied all the afternoon in amusing a sick friend. "Devilish funny he must have been,"

Ralph Miles said to Mrs. Fount. "I'd rather have called in the priest."

"Not so loud," cautioned Josephine, glancing toward her uncle. "You must remember that Amory is—well, completely respectable."

They all sat for some time over dessert in the dining-room—the dark oak walls and raftered ceiling lighted by many candles—and listened to the reminiscences of their Uncle Melchior and Mr. Tyrrel concerning certain odd characters in Florence. Then, Hillcrest being free to them all, both within doors and without, they commenced to scatter, until only Pryde and Amory Harper were left at the mahogany board.

An hour passed, and Pryde, having finished a long story, was on the point of lifting a glass to his lips when there came a woman's cry from somewhere above-stairs. The two men started; Harper jumped to his feet. "What was that?" he demanded sharply.

The cry came again, incoherent, but alarming.

They ran out into the hall and looked up the stairs. Over the railing on the second floor leaned Mrs. Fount, her hands waving wildly. "Something's happened to Wykoff—he's in the library! I—I think —— Oh, do come up at once!"

III

CLARICE'S FRIEND

SOMETHING had happened to Wykoff. He lay on the tiled hearth under the marble mantelpiece in the library, his head almost touching the ashes in the fireplace. He lay on his back, but his head was turned partly to one side and revealed a great dent in his skull. Pryde and Harper bent over him, and tried to lift him up; but the inanimate body made no response and slid from their hands down onto the tiles again.

"He's dead," gasped Harper, astounded and horrified.

Pryde, his fingers trembling, loosened Jay's coat and collar. "Get a physician—quick!"

Josephine Fount's cries had summoned the household. They all came flocking into the room and stared at the body on the hearth.

"Brandy," commanded Ralph Miles. "Here you, Hamilton and Nelson, help me get him up on the divan."

Jay was lifted and placed on the soft cushions. But as Miles regarded that great ugly wound on the back of the skull he shook his head solemnly. "It's no use,

"I'm afraid; it's no use." He took hold of Jay's wrist. "No pulse. . . . God, what a blow on the head!"

Tyrrel poured a glass of brandy, but as he in his turn bent over Jay's body he also shook his head. "No—no. There's no life left there. What a dreadful thing!"

"How could it have happened?" asked Harper. "Josephine, you found him here."

Mrs. Fount, white, big-eyed, pointed a shaking finger at the fireplace. "I found him, just there, on the hearth. The hall door was shut, and I knocked. No one answered, so I came in. . . . He lay like that—and I knew something was the matter, so I ran out to the stairs and screamed."

"What a terrible business!" groaned Pryde. "Poor Wykoff! But I don't understand it at all."

"Nor I," said Nelson Lombard. "It doesn't seem possible that if he'd slipped and fallen he could have hit his head any such blow as that."

"I urge the ladies to go down-stairs," said Tyrrel, "and you too, Melchior. Some of the men will stay here with me until the physician comes."

Josephine, clinging to her husband's arm, Marian, Clarice, close to her uncle, and Mrs. Shanklin the housekeeper, trooped out of the library.

Within a short time Dr. Cotter arrived, and after a brief examination corroborated the decision the others

had already reached—Wykoff Jay was dead, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head, due apparently to having struck the stone tiles of the fireplace with prodigious force.

How that could have happened, the physician of course couldn't say. But he made it clear that it seemed to him very extraordinary; he didn't believe that a man in slipping could possibly deal himself such a blow. It appeared as if Jay's head must actually have been hammered against the tiles.

Dr. Cotter reported to Pryde. "Under the circumstances," he said, "I should advise you to notify police headquarters. I think it's your duty."

"I shall," said Pryde, and gave orders.

Amory and Marian Harper left, so did Peter Kelley and Nelson Lombard. The Founts were staying at Hillcrest, and Clarice also for a few days; Ralph Miles insisted on waiting to help his uncle.

Two officers came from headquarters, and heard all that was to be known. It appeared that nobody knew exactly what Jay had been doing after he had left the dining-room an hour or more before Mrs. Fount had gone into the library. There was no telling how long he had been in the library nor what he had been doing there. He might have gone in to read or write or smoke; it was his favorite lounging-place; he might have been there alone; and yet, as Lombard

and Dr. Cotter—indeed as every one—felt—it was scarcely to be imagined that a simple fall could have had such a fatal result. The officers, in their turn, shook their heads. “There’s nothing more to be done to-night, Mr. Pryde,” the lieutenant stated. “We’ll take steps to make what investigation we think necessary.”

And with that the matter rested for that night; every one horrified and upset, and thinking of Jay more charitably now than they had done for some time.

Clarice was astir early in the morning. She rang for the maid, had a cup of coffee in her room, and went down-stairs. The house door was open, and she found her uncle and Tyrrel already pacing the terrace. Pryde looked as if he had had no sleep at all. Tyrrel, his hands flapping behind his back, wore a sombre, worried expression.

“Good-morning, my dear,” said the older man as Clarice stepped out to join them. “I hope you got some rest.”

“Not very much, Uncle Melchior. But there—don’t let me interrupt whatever you were saying.”

“I was saying,” Tyrrel explained, “that it seems to me Mr. Pryde ought to take steps to investigate personally the cause of Mr. Jay’s death.”

“And I was telling him,” put in Pryde, “that there

are the police, and other people whose business it is to do that."

"Oh, the officials!" Tyrrel objected with a touch of scorn. "You know what such men are in Italy. I fancy they're much the same here."

"Still, it is their business, Ambrose. I—I hate doing anything myself."

"You think," said Clarice, very tense, "that there was—that there might have been—a crime committed?"

The two men looked at her solemnly. Tyrrel shrugged his high shoulders:

"We don't know what to think, my dear Miss Pryde. And that's the reason I'm anxious for your uncle to engage an investigator."

"Detectives are the devil!" muttered Pryde. "To engage one would seem to advertise the fact that we were sure there was something wrong. They might rake up no end of unpleasant facts, and all of them be immaterial."

"I see what you mean, Uncle," Clarice admitted. "And yet, I think there's something in what Mr. Tyrrel says. If some one did attack Wykoff—why, we ought to know what happened; isn't that so?"

"Who could have attacked him?" queried Pryde. "Who could have had any motive?"

"There you are back again where you started,"

Tyrrel objected. "You and I don't know of any motive—probably we'd never discover one. But the outside investigator ——"

And so they continued with their argument until Clarice, confused by the pros and cons, left them and entered the house.

Avoiding the dining-room, where the loud voice of Miles was to be heard addressing some one at breakfast, she went to the small writing-room and sat down at the telephone. She had told a friend of hers, Clement Dale, he might stop for her in his car at nine, to take her in town that morning. Now she told him she couldn't go, that her uncle might need her.

"What's the trouble, Clarice?" asked the man at the other end of the wire.

"I don't want to tell you over the telephone, Clement."

"You sound mighty mysterious this morning."

"Yes? Well, I'd rather not say anything more now."

"Suppose I stop,—can I see you?"

She hesitated. "I guess so. I'll be out on the drive."

"In fifteen or twenty minutes then."

And within the time he stated Clement Dale arrived in his small, shiny roadster at the foot of the terrace.

Clarice, her pretty face unusually sober, gave him a welcoming nod. While he listened, absorbed, she told him what had happened. "And my poor uncle doesn't know what to do," she concluded. "I think that he ought to consult a lawyer."

"What could a lawyer do? I'm one, you know."

"I had in mind some old, long-experienced lawyer."

"Well, of course I can't claim to be that."

But he was undoubtedly keen and intelligent-looking, and as Clarice regarded him a sudden idea came to her.

"I don't know why you shouldn't do. I've always thought you had a very level head. I'd take your advice on most things."

"Thanks. But from what you've told me, it seems to me what Mr. Pryde really needs is a detective."

"He doesn't like them. Please come up and meet him, Clement."

Dale left his car, mounted the terrace, and was introduced to Pryde and Tyrrel.

"My niece has told you?" asked Pryde, scrutinizing the good-looking young man, who appeared as fresh and fit as the fine autumn morning.

"Yes, sir. I'm very sorry to hear it. I didn't know Mr. Jay well, but I always liked him."

Pryde hesitated. "The peculiar circumstances make

this doubly tragic. We have the police, of course, to rely on; but my friend here, Mr. Tyrrel, doesn't think highly of them."

Dale glanced at Tyrrel, whose dark intent eyes were brooding over the park.

"I think I should leave it to the police, sir," Dale advised. "They'll investigate, of course."

"Perfunctory," murmured Tyrrel.

Here Clarice broke in. "No, my uncle ought to have other advice. Mr. Dale's a lawyer. Uncle Melchior, why don't you ask Mr. Dale to help you?"

The young man flushed. "As I've already told Miss Pryde, this doesn't seem to me to be a lawyer's business."

"I thought everything was a lawyer's business," Clarice retorted. "To help other people out."

"Well, if you put it that way," said Dale. "Of course, I'm at your service."

"A capital suggestion, Melchior," stated Tyrrel with conviction. "There will undoubtedly be legal details to attend to, and Mr. Dale is well qualified to see to them. He's a friend of Miss Pryde; and I'm sure you need have no doubts as to his discretion."

Dale, as he glanced at Tyrrel, and from him to Clarice, was conscious that the owner of Hillcrest was observing him closely. The young lawyer felt his position to be decidedly embarrassing. He had

no wish to thrust himself on Mr. Pryde's attention; indeed he would very much have preferred to withdraw at once and allow them to discuss the matter in private; but he knew Clarice did not want him to go yet.

"All right," said Pryde, as if the result of his observation was satisfactory. "If Mr. Dale will give us his help,—professionally, of course,—I would like to avail myself of it. I haven't yet seen Mrs. Shanklin and the others this morning. So, Clarice, I'll ask you to tell Mr. Dale anything he may want to know."

Clarice and her friend went into the house, to the little writing-room. Dale threw his hat and gloves on a table and thrust his hands into his pockets. "This is—er—something entirely new in my legal experience," he said. "The old-fashioned type of lawyer was very much like the old-fashioned family doctor—a jack-of-all-trades. But we've gotten away from that. I'm afraid I'm only accustomed to deal with concrete facts, set down in black and white."

"I know, Clement; and yet I do feel that you're the right man to help us. We can all trust you; but how could we trust some man we'd never seen before, some one who might not be above using Uncle Melchior for his own purposes?"

"But I'm not a trained investigator, Clarice."

She tapped her foot impatiently on the floor. "I'm

not going to tell you what I think your qualifications are. Put my opinion down to woman's intuition, if you like. I could see that my uncle and Mr. Tyrrel approved of you from the start. That ought to be enough for the present."

Dale bowed. The situation, although entirely unusual to him, yet held decided interest. Heretofore he had only known Clarice as a lively companion, of whom he was very fond. Now, it appeared, he was to see her in a new light.

"I'll call up the office, and tell them I'm detained," he said. And when that was done, he seated himself at the table and picked up a sheet of paper and pencil. "You've told me something, but I wish you'd give me all the facts again. I want to get your own impressions."

She described in detail her recollection of the finding of Jay's body and what she had been told that Dr. Cotter and the officers had said.

Dale listened intently. "I suppose there are only two possible explanations," he said when she had finished. "Either Mr. Jay fell and struck his head a terrible blow on the hearth, or some one else attacked him and gave him that wound."

"They all seemed to think no one could possibly get such a blow just by falling," Clarice explained. "It seems that way to me too."

“Very well. That leaves the question: Who attacked him? Why should any one? There must have been a motive.”

“Nobody knows that. I’ve tried to find an answer.”

“Clarice,” said Dale, looking at her seriously, “if I go into this business I must go into it to learn the truth. What I find is at Mr. Pryde’s disposal, to use as he may see fit. But it may not be very agreeable.”

“I understand. You’re to get at the truth. That’s what my uncle wants.”

“Very well then.” Dale drew some lines on the paper. “If Mr. Jay was attacked, the next question is: Was his enemy some one who had been in the house some time, or some one who came in from outside?”

“A thief, you mean? The library windows were closed, and there were several of us out on the terrace who would surely have seen any one climbing in. Both doors were closed too; but of course it would have been possible for a man to have slipped out and down the back-stairs, though the back door is just off the housekeeper’s room and she was there all the evening.”

“We’ll leave the question of whether some one stole into the house;—for the present, at least. It seems extremely unlikely, when the house was full of people. Besides, if an enemy had wanted to get at him he would

have had so much better chance to find him alone somewhere else. Now who was in the house that you do know of,—every one, all the servants? ”

She gave him a list of the names, and he wrote them all down on his paper, even to Maria Busby, the cook's daughter, who did odd chores, and little Tom Hastings, the boy who polished the boots, shined brasses and ran errands.

“ The maids we'll strike off,—for the present,” said Dale. “ And for the matter of that, all the women as well. If any one struck such a blow as you describe, it must have been a man. Mr. Jay may not have been very strong, but he surely could have held off a woman.”

“ Unless he was taken by surprise,” Clarice suggested.

“ Yes,” admitted Dale dubiously; “ he might have been thrown to the floor by surprise, but it took strength to give him that blow.”

For a few moments he studied the paper, checking the names with his pencil. “ Mr. Pryde, Mr. Tyrrel,” he read slowly, “ Ralph Miles, Pip Kelley, Hamilton Fount, Nelson Lombard, Amory Harper, Antonio Poppi, Bramwell, the butler, Jenkins, the second man, Lyddon, the gardener, Somers, the chauffeur, Tom Hastings, the boy. I think we must strike off Tom,—for the present.”

"And Uncle Melchior too."

Dale gave a little smile. "Yes, Uncle Melchior too."

"And of course Mr. Tyrrel. And Pip and Ralph ——"

"Strike them all off, shall we?—except perhaps the gardener and the chauffeur? No, no, Clarice. What is it we are taught detectives take as their first axiom? Suspect every one until they clear themselves,—and then continue to suspect them. But Mr. Pryde, I admit, can hardly be suspected of anything wrong."

"Or the others, for that matter," said Clarice; "unless, perhaps it might be ——" She stopped. "Oh, it's terrible to sit here and talk in this cold-blooded way about people who might possibly have done such a thing!"

Dale leaned back in his chair. "There is only one way in which we can tackle this problem—and that is in a cold-blooded way. A lawyer knows that he's got to be cold-blooded—in the best interests of his clients. Once you allow prejudice to enter in, justice flies out of the window."

"Yes, I can see that's so," Clarice agreed. "And really that's one of the chief reasons why I wanted you to help my uncle—you start without prejudices." She nodded. "All right. What next?"

"Just now you said," Dale continued, "that you

didn't see how any of these people could have a guilty knowledge unless, perhaps, it might be—of whom were you thinking? ”

“ Uncle Melchior's servant, Antonio Poppi, has a secretive air about him. He's always appearing where he's not expected. All the family's talking about it, and I've noticed it myself. Of course it may be only because he's so dark and silent and a foreigner that one thinks him mysterious. He's been with uncle for years, and uncle thinks him the perfect valet.”

“ Prejudice, Clarice. It is so easy to suspect people we don't like.”

“ I'm not suspecting him,” she retorted indignantly. “ I'm only giving you my impressions, as you asked me to do.”

“ Yes, that's right. That is what I wanted,” Dale admitted amiably. He glanced at his list. “ Very well, there's Poppi,—for the present. How about the other men-servants, leaving out Tom, the boy? ”

“ The gardener's an elderly man and very deaf. He usually goes home to his family—they've a little house on Shoemaker Lane—about five every afternoon. Bramwell, the butler, is the most respectable person you ever laid your eyes on; he's always been employed by F. F. V.'s. He's rather stout and slow-moving. I can't imagine him—— But there, I didn't mean to put in any opinion. . . . Let's see. Jenkins, the

other man, is a pleasant young fellow. Mrs. Fount knows his mother, and engaged him to come here. I don't know much about Somers, the chauffeur, except that he's an Englishman, with a good deal of manner."

"All right," said Dale. "Jenkins and Somers, it seems then, are the unknown quantities." He tapped the sheet of paper with his pencil. "So we come to Mr. Tyrrel."

Clarice related what she knew about him, while Dale jotted down a few items.

"Ralph Miles," read off the lawyer.

"You know Ralph yourself."

"Slightly. Meet him at the club and occasionally at parties. I'd say—big, brusque, inclined to be a bit overbearing; thinks well of his own opinion and likes to cram it down your throat. No offense meant, Clarice, to a relation of yours. Miles, I should say, was a man who mightn't always be a pleasant customer."

"I agree with you. I like Ralph,—he's always been very nice to me; though sometimes I do get angry when he tells me what he thinks I ought to do. But he can be domineering. He treats Pip sometimes in a way that I don't like."

"And Pip Kelley?—Yes, I know him. Sensitive and high strung, ambition to paint at war with a desire to make money; moody a lot of the time."

"He's really a dear," said Clarice. "He ought to marry a very rich girl, have all sorts of beautiful things, and only paint what he wants to."

"Hamilton Fount?—I don't know him, though of course I know who he is."

"He has plenty of self-confidence; not very much imagination; prides himself on being a man of affairs; and is under his wife's thumb, though he doesn't know it." Clarice frowned. "Dear me, that doesn't sound very charitable."

"It's what I want, though. Next—Nelson Lombard."

"I don't know him very well,—that is, not the real Nelson. He's jolly and friendly and all that, but—but—I don't know how to put it."

"I've heard about him. Handsome, dashing, fond of the good things. All right. Now the last, Mr. Harper."

"Cold and respectable. No one knows what he thinks, not even his wife Marian. One couldn't make a very satisfactory list of his virtues and vices."

"Just a straight line, without any loops or loppings over?" Dale penciled something on his paper. "That type of man is the very worst sort to have in the witness-box." He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "Now, Clarice ——"

Some one coughed outside the door.

“Yes. Come in,” said Clarice.

Antonio appeared. “Mr. Pryde would like to see Mr. Dale in the library. The officers are there.”

“Very good,” said Dale. “I’ll come up.”

“That door was ajar, wasn’t it?” went on the lawyer, when the servant had disappeared. “First thing to remember—never discuss this business where we can be overheard. I guess I’m a wretched detective, Clarice. However, I’m going to learn all that I possibly can. And two things seem to me very important. Was Wykoff Jay robbed? And what is there to be found in the library—are there any scraps of evidence they haven’t yet picked up there?”

IV

THE MEMORANDUM IN THE DIVAN

THE police officials had made their investigation by daylight, asked more questions, taken all sorts of notes, put their heads together, said they would start the proper machinery in motion,—and departed again.

Clement Dale had looked and listened and examined. He had no doubt from his first inspection of Jay's body that the man had been thrown violently against the hearth and his head beaten against the tiles in a savage blow. Jay was not an athlete; it would not have taken unusual strength to handle him so roughly. That his coat was not torn nor disordered did not controvert Dale's conclusion; Jay's assailant might have taken him by the shoulders and pinned him down on the tiles.

So far as could be discovered, Jay had not been robbed. In his coat was his wallet, containing several bank-notes; in his waistcoat his gold watch and chain; in his trouser pockets a bunch of keys and a penknife. If anything had been stolen, there was no knowing what it was. And considering all the circumstances, Dale at once eliminated the idea of an ordinary theft.

His attention was next concerned with the room in which the crime had taken place. The library was oblong, large, with a high, raftered ceiling. At one end was the fireplace, with the divan before it and easy chairs at each side. At the other end was the big bay window, looking onto the drive and terrace at the front of the house. A glance from this window showed Dale rough stone walls, with a few vines, but no trellis; and he discarded the idea of any one having entered in that way, more especially since Clarice had told him that there had been people on the terrace most of the evening.

A large table covered with books and magazines stood midway between the fireplace and the bay window. The two walls the length of the room were lined with black walnut bookcases, topped with a few choice engravings and three or four statuettes. On one wall the book-shelves were interrupted by a door, barred at present by a heavy, revolving globe. Dale pulled the globe away and opened the door. Here was a closet, in which were stored boxes of old papers and pamphlets, a short step-ladder, a typewriter on a stand and other odds and ends.

The other two doors in the library, both at the fireplace end, opened into the main hall on the second floor and into a smaller hall in the servants' quarters. Neither of these, he ascertained, was customarily

locked; and any one sitting on the divan would command a view of both these entrances.

Dale inspected all these details, the rug-covered hardwood floor, the book-littered centre table, the dozen or so easy chairs; but saw nothing unusual. At length he came back to the fireplace, where Tyrrel and Clarice were talking. "Well, my two first questions seem to be answered—for the present, at least," he said. "So far as I can judge, Mr. Jay wasn't robbed, and there's nothing in this room to furnish any clue."

"My own conclusions," said Tyrrel. "I was in this room yesterday morning, and everything looks to me now just as it did then."

"Clarice," asked Dale, "what time was it, do you think, when Mr. Jay came up here?"

"About nine o'clock. He left the dining-room a little before I did. When I went out on the terrace only Uncle Melchior and Mr. Harper were still at the dinner-table."

"And what time was it when Mrs. Fount came in here and found him?"

"A little after ten, I think. Wasn't it, Mr. Tyrrel?"

Tyrrel nodded. "Yes. I was down-stairs in the writing-room, and I remember the clock on the mantel struck a few minutes before I heard Mrs. Fount call."

"He was here from about nine to ten then," Dale reflected; "presumably smoking most of the time, to

judge from the cigarettes in the fireplace. Also, to judge from them, he was probably sitting on the divan. The lights were on, I suppose? ”

“ They were when Mrs. Fount came in,” Tyrrel volunteered. “ She said she saw him at once.”

“ All the lights were on, I suppose? ” Dale stepped to the door and pushed the electric button. Half a dozen wall brackets blazed up, two at either side of the fireplace, and a green-shaded reading-lamp on the centre table. “ The room would be pretty bright,” Dale continued, switching off the current. “ Clarice, did you happen to notice from the terrace whether the library was lighted? ”

“ No, I didn't. I was sitting most of the time facing the other way.”

“ Whom were you talking with? ”

“ Pip Kelley. He was telling me about a portrait he's painting.”

“ Well,” said Dale, “ Mr. Jay was sitting on that divan, smoking. He probably wasn't reading, or we'd have found a book or paper at hand. The room was well lighted, so when the other man came in Mr. Jay must have seen him. Presumably there was some conversation first.”

The lawyer stared at the hearthstone, his brows knit in thought. “ When the other man left, there were two doors for him to choose from. One led out the

front way, where the chances were good he might encounter some one. The other—to the servants' rooms and the back stairway. You said, if I remember right, Clarice, that the housekeeper's room opened on the foot of that stairway."

"Yes, it does. And Mrs. Shanklin was there all last evening."

"Could I ask her a few questions?"

Clarice rose. "I'll get her. You stay here."

A few minutes later Clarice returned, accompanied by a nice-looking, gray-haired woman. "This is my uncle's lawyer, Mr. Dale," Clarice explained. "He wants to ask you some questions, Mrs. Shanklin."

"Certainly, sir," said the housekeeper readily. "I only hope, Miss Clarice, I can help you all in this dreadful business."

"Please sit down, Mrs. Shanklin," said Dale. "I understand that the foot of the back stairway is opposite the door of your sitting-room, and if your door is open you have a clear view of any one coming into the house at the rear and going up those stairs or of any one coming down and going out there?"

Mrs. Shanklin, seated, her hands clasped in her lap, gave an energetic nod. "That is so, sir. And what's more, any one using those stairs has to come through my room or go out through the back door."

"Now what I would like to know," Dale continued,

in his quiet, pleasant voice, "is whether you saw or heard any one come down those stairs last night between, say, nine o'clock and the time when you heard Mrs. Fount call?"

The housekeeper reflected. "I was in my room there all that time, checking up the things that were to go to the laundry. That door was open, I know; I almost always have it open so I can keep tabs on who comes in and goes out that way. The outer door sticks,—you have to give it quite a pull to get it open; and I'm pretty certain I'd have heard anybody trying to turn that knob. No, sir, I'd say pretty positive I didn't see anybody on those stairs before I ran up to find out what was the matter."

"But of course you weren't facing the door all that time," Dale went on. "Even though it does stick, some one might have gone out by the back door."

"I scarcely think so, sir. It seems like I must have heard them." Mrs. Shanklin leaned forward and gave an abrupt nod. "Now I do remember something. I did hear footsteps up at the top of the stairs, quick, as if somebody was in a hurry. I turned round to see who was coming down—but nobody came. I stepped to the door; but the stairs were empty."

"How long was this before you heard Mrs. Fount call?"

Mrs. Shanklin considered,—she was clearly a woman

who appreciated the importance of her words. "I'd put it at about ten or fifteen minutes before, sir."

"Some one was coming down, but changed his mind? Now when you came up, did you happen to see anybody in the hall at the top of the stairway?"

"No, sir, I didn't. I opened the library door on that side and came in here. Mr. Pryde and some of the other gentlemen were already here. I didn't see anybody in the back hall."

"Do you think of anything else?" asked Dale, looking at Tyrrel and Clarice.

Each answered in the negative, and the housekeeper was dismissed.

"Well, we're not much wiser," said the lawyer, "except for the fact that some one apparently changed his or her mind about going down those stairs. I'd like to know who that was. Unfortunately, in a big house like this, it would be only too easy for a person to hide in an unoccupied room until he could come out unobserved."

"The proverbial needle in the haystack," commented Tyrrel. "And a man might have gone out through the front hall and escaped notice that way."

"I suppose he might," agreed Clarice, "but there'd be a pretty good chance of his being seen. Pip and I were on the terrace; Uncle Melchior and Amory were in the dining-room—and that has double doors look-

ing out onto the hall and the stairs; and you were in the writing-room;—was that door open? ”

“ Yes, I think it was. But I was busy writing, and wouldn't have been apt to notice what was happening outside.”

Dale took from his pocket the paper on which he had made his first notes. “ Mr. Pryde and Mr. Harper were still at the dinner-table, Mr. Tyrrel in the writing-room, Miss Pryde and Peter Kelley on the terrace. How about the others? Ralph Miles? ”

“ He talked to us for a while,” said Clarice, “ and then I remember he said he'd go in and get Bramwell to give him the key to the storeroom where Hamilton Fount put the wines and liquors he brought over for uncle's use. He said, ‘ I want to see what sort of poison old Ham's serving up to the Governor,’ or something like that.”

“ And Mr. Fount? ” Dale asked.

“ I had a little chat with him after he left the dining-room,” said Tyrrel. “ He came into the room where I was writing and told me something about a foreign exchange department they're starting at his bank. Then I think he said he was going up to his room to look over some business papers. He and his wife are staying here at present, you know. They have the two rooms at the north end of the second floor hall.”

“Nelson Lombard?” read out Dale from his paper.

He looked up to catch a covert glance from Clarice in the direction of Tyrrel.

“Yes, Nelson Lombard,” the lawyer repeated. “What do we know about him?”

“He went outdoors with Marian,” said Clarice, “while we were on the terrace; and I don’t think they’d come in again before Pip and I ran up-stairs.”

“Hm,” mused Dale. “That’s all, except the servants.”

Tyrrel stood up, and walked the length of the room, his hands behind his back. “It certainly seems as if none of the men who were here last night could have known what was going on in this library. And I fancy none of the women ——”

“I don’t see how they could have,” agreed Dale. With a frown and a shake of the head he sat down on the divan beside Clarice, the place Tyrrel had vacated.

“How did Mrs. Fount happen to come into the room?” Tyrrel asked. “Of course there might be a hundred reasons,” he added. “But I wondered if she thought there was some one in here, some one she wanted to see.”

Clarice made no immediate answer. Apparently that query had not occurred to her, nor had she heard her cousin Josephine say why she had looked into the

library at that particular moment. "I don't know, Mr. Tyrrel," she said presently. "Ever since my uncle and you have been here at Hillcrest Mrs. Fount has been superintending things. I suppose it's natural she should go about everywhere, just as if it were her own house."

"What's this?" Dale, whose fingers had been running along the upholstered end of the divan where he was sitting, drew a crumpled ball of paper from the corner where the cushioned arm met the cushioned seat. "Something stuck in here." He unrolled the ball and smoothed it out.

"There's writing on it, Clement," said Clarice, leaning toward him. "What does it say?"

"Not much. Evidently some sort of a memorandum. 'June, 1912. The Endicott Estate. Atlantic Trust Company.'" He handed the paper to Clarice. "Do you recognize the writing?"

"I think it's Wykoff's. He wrote that sort of hand. And he always made Greek e's."

"And you found it tucked in the divan, did you?" queried Tyrrel, who was looking over Clarice's shoulder.

"Yes. Mr. Jay must have pushed it in there; and, from the look of the paper, he must have been pretty excited when he did it. The Atlantic Trust Company? . . . I don't remember that name. How-

ever, it ought to be easy enough to run down the reference."

Clarice returned the paper, which Dale carefully placed in his pocketbook. "And now I'm going in town to my office," said the lawyer. "Call me up if you learn anything new. I'll be out here again by five o'clock this afternoon, Clarice, if I possibly can. Good-morning, Mr. Tyrrel. And both of you please keep an eye on Mr. Pryde."

V

DALE ASKS QUESTIONS

It was a little after five that afternoon when the small, shiny roadster drew up in the drive at Hillcrest and an energetic young man sprang out. Bramwell admitted him and showed him into the drawing-room on the left of the front door. Soon Clarice came in, and saying, "It's so stuffy here, Clement," led the lawyer through an open French window to a corner of the terrace that was glassed in and furnished with easy chairs.

"Anything new?" Dale inquired when they were seated.

"No. I understand the police are searching the neighborhood for suspicious characters."

"Dragging a net all over the place, are they? Well, I suppose that's one of the things that ought to be done. Officials make haste slowly. I remember in my first case ——"

"Oh, Clement, Clement," Clarice broke in, "please don't tell me about that now! I know you have something more important to say."

"It's not very much," Dale said modestly. "I

found out that the Atlantic Trust Company went out of business in July, 1912. The Artisans and Tradesmen's Trust Company took over its affairs. The Atlantic got into difficulties, loaned too much money on real estate and building ventures. And it seems there was some question about the possible misuse of certain trust funds, one of them being the Endicott Estate. The Artisans and Tradesmen's,—which was a much bigger concern than the Atlantic,—was mixed up in the affairs itself, and to make the best of a bad business took over the smaller company, shouldered its losses, and ultimately straightened out the tangle."

"Yes," said Clarice. "I think I understand that."

Dale could not refrain from a smile. It had taken him considerable work to get at the facts, and he was sure that if he went into details Clarice would be all at sea. "So far, so good," he continued. "But I couldn't find the name of Wykoff Jay connected with the business anywhere."

"Yet that crumpled piece of paper undoubtedly referred to this?" she asked.

"Undoubtedly. Wykoff Jay had made that memorandum for some definite purpose. He had it in his hand;—therefore it was of some present use to him. In fact I'm inclined to believe that he got very much excited on account of it, and that's why he crumpled it up and thrust it into the corner of the divan."

"You mean that he was talking with some one about it?"

Dale nodded. "I think so. Everything points to that."

"And have you any idea with whom he was talking?"

"I have an idea. But I'm not going to tell you what it is yet. I want to keep your mind absolutely free to receive your own impressions. You may help a lot in that way." He glanced about. "There are no walls with ears here. That velvet-shod Antonio Poppi can't be listening. It seems a safe place. Is Mrs. Fount in the house?"

"She was writing notes. I suppose you mean that you'd like to speak to her out here."

"I should, if it's not too much trouble."

A few minutes later Clarice brought Mrs. Fount to the glassed-in corner of the terrace and presented Dale to her.

The young lawyer found himself fronting a rather red-faced woman, with grayish-blue eyes, and a positive nose and chin. In girlhood she might well have been handsome, but her regular features, as she had taken on weight, had lost their first delicacy of outline, and now expressed a certain arbitrariness, which was accentuated by the careful and precise consideration she evidently gave to her dress. "No children,"

reflected Dale. "Little softening influence in her daily life. Wants her own way, and usually gets it. Not very receptive to new ideas."

Aloud he said: "Mrs. Fount, I don't know whether Mr. Pryde has told you that he's asked me to help him if I can?"

"My uncle told me that this morning," was the prompt answer. "Of course I know who you are,—I've heard Clarice speak of you, and I've met your mother a number of times."

A certain formal accord having been thus established;—for Dale saw at once that social affiliations played a large part in Mrs. Fount's opinions;—he felt free to begin his questions. And first he said, "Have you any idea what Mr. Jay did after he left the dining-room with the others last evening?"

"Not the slightest idea. The only thing I remember is that he stopped to drink a glass of wine at the sideboard after he got up from the table. Nelson Lombard and Mr. Tyrrel were standing there, and I heard them invite him to join them. I should have thought they all had had plenty to drink at supper, but—well, my cousin Wykoff found it difficult to resist that sort of invitation, if you understand me."

"I do, Mrs. Fount," Dale agreed. "And you saw nothing more of him after he had his glass of wine at the sideboard?"

"I was busy myself. I feel a certain responsibility for my uncle's household. I had a little talk with his man Antonio, and I interviewed the cook. Then I went to my own room for half an hour or so."

"You had things to talk over with Mr. Fount, I suppose?" Dale suggested.

Mrs. Fount made no reply; perhaps she felt the off-hand question called for no definite answer.

"I say that," pursued Dale, "because I understand that your husband was in his room at the time, looking over some business papers. His room is the one next to yours at the north end of the hall, isn't it?"

"Yes. But what makes you think he was in his room then?"

"I believe it was Mr. Tyrrel who told me that Mr. Fount, when he left him in the writing-room, said that he was going up to his own room."

"Oh, Mr. Tyrrel!" repeated Mrs. Fount on a note of exasperation.

"Your husband wasn't in his room then?" suggested the placid Dale.

"No; not when I was in mine," the lady stated, her tone indicating that she took satisfaction in repudiating any inference based on Tyrrel's information.

"The door between the two rooms was open?"

"Certainly it was." The grayish-blue eyes grew

more aggressive. "But really, I can't see, Mr. Dale, where all this talk about Mr. Fount and myself is leading."

"I know. You must excuse me. Lawyers are famous for asking all sorts of irrelevant questions, aren't they? I'm simply appealing to you for information because you are in a way Mr. Pryde's right hand, as I understand; the person of all his family who is closest to him and most familiar with affairs at his house."

Mrs. Fount's expression softened; after all, this young man had a well-bred, pleasant manner.

"Mr. Fount was not in his own room,—I take it that's perfectly clear," Dale's amiable voice continued. "But you did want to see him; and thinking that he might be in the library you later went to that door. He might very likely be there; he used the library a good deal. Isn't that so, Mrs. Fount?"

"Yes, he used it a good deal. We're living here at present—to help my uncle."

"So that's why you went to the library door—to look for your husband?"

The lady gave a thin smile. "What a hand you are at making suggestions! Yes, I did think that possibly my husband was in that room."

"There wasn't any precise reason for your thinking that?"

“Well, I—I thought I heard his voice there when I came up-stairs earlier.”

“Was the library door open then?”

“It was ajar.”

“But you didn’t see the person to whom he was talking?—Mr. Jay or some one else?”

“I saw nobody.” Mrs. Fount grew stubborn. “I thought I heard his voice; that’s all I know about it.”

Dale had been leaning forward as he asked the last few questions; now he sat back and passed his hand smoothly over his hair. He looked out at the sunset, shining through the trees. “I’m afraid I’ve put you to a great deal of inconvenience; and to small purpose too,” he said, almost apologetically. “I realize that Mr. Jay and your husband could have had very little in common; they were men of such different types.”

“Nothing in common at all,” Mrs. Fount retorted promptly. “Though my husband was always ready to give Cousin Wykoff good advice.”

“Yes, I understand that. In money matters, I suppose?”

“In anything;—yes, mainly in money matters. But I’m afraid Cousin Wykoff was inclined to be a speculator.”

“And your husband doesn’t approve of that? No, of course he wouldn’t. Mr. Fount is one of the

vice presidents of the Markham Trust Company, isn't he? "

Mrs. Fount gave a complacent nod.

"With a long experience in banking," Dale went on. "Let me see, he was with the Atlantic Trust before that, wasn't he? "

Another nod, not quite so self-satisfied.

"Now I wonder, Mrs. Fount, if Mr. Jay had recently consulted your husband as to investments."

"I know nothing about that. Mr. Fount is very discreet. But," here the lady's voice imperceptibly lowered, "I did hear somewhere that Wykoff was in money difficulties. Let me see—er—I think it was Nelson Lombard who mentioned that to me." She hesitated, and then added brusquely: "But, of course, one can't put very much reliance in what Nelson Lombard says—or hints."

Dale made her a pleasant bow. "I thank you for what you have told me," he said. "It really does seem very difficult to find out what happened in the library. All I can do is to ask questions—which appear to lead nowhere." He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps the police will find that it was some tramp or thief ——"

"Have you questioned that Italian servant, Antonio Poppi?" Mrs. Fount's voice was discreetly lowered.

"No. Why? "

"As I came down the hall from my room on my way to the library the door of Mr. Pryde's room opened and that fellow looked out. He's what I'd call a prowler, all eyes and ears and no tongue. I don't like his ways, and I've intimated as much to my uncle. And I heard Wykoff joking Mr. Pryde about his soft-footed valet at supper last night; and he'd done it before. Those Italians are revengeful. It's barely possible one of the other servants repeated to him what Wykoff had said."

"There may be something in that," Dale nodded. "And now, Mrs. Fount, I mustn't trespass on your kindness any longer. Thank you again for your very candid answers. My position is difficult, as I'm sure you'll appreciate."

Mrs. Fount rose, favored him with a smile, which somehow didn't touch her eyes, and withdrew into the house.

Dale took a cigarette from his case, lighted it, walked along the terrace to throw the match away, and returned, casting a glance at the French windows through which Mrs. Fount had entered. "Well," he said, lifting his eyebrows to Clarice, "what do you make of it now?"

"I see what you think," she said. "You think that Wykoff Jay and Hamilton Fount had a quarrel."

“In dealing with witnesses,” said Dale, “I’ve found that one learns most through using his antennæ.”

“Antennæ?” Clarice questioned.

“Feelers, little reactions or impressions. A person will tell you one thing, and all your instinctive sensations will tell you something entirely different. Surely a woman ought to know what I mean. A woman’s antennæ ——”

“Yes,” she interrupted. “I understand. Well, Clement?”

“What did you feel about Mrs. Fount?”

Clarice bit her under-lip. “I don’t know exactly why, but I felt as if she were frightened.”

“So did I. She *was* frightened. She was keeping something back. I wanted to make sure that that was your reaction.” Again he glanced about to assure himself they could not be overheard, then dropped into a chair close to Clarice. “My guess is that Wykoff Jay found out in some way that Fount was involved in those trust estate irregularities of the Atlantic Trust Company—Fount was assistant Trust Officer there in 1912—and taxed him with it in the library last night. We have this slip of paper, referring to certain facts; we have the circumstance that Fount must have known to what they related; and we know that Mrs. Fount thought her husband was in the library last night about ten o’clock. It’s at least logical to suppose that he had

been talking with Mr. Jay on that particular subject in the room during the evening."

"Clement, I'm certain that Hamilton couldn't possibly have struck Wykoff."

"I'm not saying he did. But I do say that Mrs. Fount is afraid her husband knows more about this business than he's told any one yet. She mentioned Antonio. Why? Not because she thinks he really had anything to do with Wykoff Jay, but to divert my attention."

"Clement, Hamilton may be weak, but he's not a scoundrel."

"Clarice, I have my suspicions that Mr. Jay was not—well, was not as pleasant in his talk with Fount as he might have been."

At this point there appeared ascending the steps of the terrace a man in a black-and-white checked suit and a smart gray felt hat. Dale looked a question at Clarice.

"Nelson Lombard," she whispered.

As if he had caught the whisper the man turned toward the glassed-in corner and came briskly forward. He was well set up, rather debonair. He took off his hat, revealing his close-cut reddish hair. "'Afternoon, Clarice," he said, and glanced at her companion.

"This is Clement Dale—Nelson Lombard," said the young woman, making the introduction. And as the

two men shook hands she briefly explained the reason for the lawyer's presence.

"Oh yes, quite so; I should think we might need a lawyer." Lombard sat down. "I've been thinking about this mysterious affair all day; I suppose we all have. And I can't think of any one who'd really want to harm Wykoff. He had some enemies doubtless, for he didn't always curb his tongue. But they weren't the sort of people who'd do this sort of thing. He was pretty hard up,—debts, and short of the market; I happen to know that. No, Mr. Dale, I can't make it out at all."

"Mr. Jay was in need of ready money, was he?"

"No question of that. I know what he'd been doing. But that doesn't explain why somebody should attack him. No, it's a complete mystery to me."

"You weren't anywhere near the library yourself last evening, were you?" Dale asked.

"No," was the ready answer. "Mrs. Harper and I were outdoors most of the time. You remember, Clarice, we passed you here on the terrace?"

Clarice nodded. "I remember. And you didn't come back until after we'd gone up-stairs."

"That's right. An odd thing happened. Mrs. Harper and I stopped for a few minutes in the little summer-house. We were talking, and all at once I felt there was some one near us. I looked cautiously

around, and sure enough there was that Italian fellow, Antonio, Mr. Pryde's man, tiptoeing—I'll swear he was tiptoeing—across the grass behind us. I watched him till he was out of sight, round the corner of the house. He's a bad actor I'm thinking,—something queer about him. I'd keep a sharp eye on him."

"Nobody seems to like Poppi," Dale observed drily.

"Except Uncle Melchior," said Clarice. "He thinks him the salt of the earth."

"Well, I must go in and see Uncle Mel," said Lombard. "What a horrible thing to have happen when he'd hardly more than got home."

"I think he'd like to see you too, Clement," said Clarice.

Lombard led the way in the direction of the front door. As they passed one of the drawing-room windows Dale looked in. He saw something, and allowed the other two to go on without him. The curtain concealed him, but not the man who sat inside. The latter had a newspaper on his knee, but was not reading it. Instead he was twirling a little gold penknife on the end of a chain in an absorbed, detached manner.

"That's Amory Harper," thought Dale. "I remember—I've seen him in town with his wife."

Then in at the drawing-room door came a man whom Dale was certain must be Mr. Pryde's valet. Harper turned round. On his face was a look of

quick fear, a most unpleasant expression. The valet glided up to him and appeared to whisper in his ear. Harper nodded, the unpleasant expression vanished. He took from his pocket a folded bank-note and slipped it into the servant's hand.

Clarice looked back from the front door. "Aren't you coming, Clement?"

Dale walked along. "Mrs. Fount is afraid of something," he thought. "I think I can understand that. But what is Harper afraid of? He's got something on his conscience, I'll bet my hat!"

VI

THE BANKER EXPLAINS

CLEMENT DALE'S position as an investigator at Hillcrest was extremely difficult; and yet this enterprise, on which he had somewhat abruptly embarked,—and mainly, as he admitted to himself, because Clarice Pryde had so evidently wanted him to assist her uncle,—fascinated him the farther he went on with it. Without much experience of criminal cases, he found himself absorbed by the intricacies of human nature as they revealed themselves here to a much greater degree than he had ever been absorbed by any civil case. He held no brief for or against any one,—unless it was for Clarice; he was not engaged to prove or disprove any statement of facts; his aim was simply to find out who it was that had killed Wykoff Jay.

The police had discovered no one outside the house upon whom suspicion could rest; and Dale was of the opinion that they never would. His own view of the matter was that Jay had quarreled with some one in the library, that the quarrel had led to a physical encounter, and that in a moment of blind passion the assailant,

whoever he was, had killed the other man. Dale knew a good deal about Wykoff Jay, and some of that knowledge was not to the latter's credit. He had lived a rather loose life, counting at times on his family name and respectable connections to keep him from social shipwreck. He had been a gambler and a man not over particular in the use of scandal to further his own interests. A man like that was certain to make enemies. Already Dale knew that neither Mrs. Fount nor Nelson Lombard had been especially well-disposed toward their kinsman.

The lawyer was not greatly surprised when, on the morning following his talk with Mrs. Fount, his office boy brought him the card of Mrs. Fount's husband. He sent word that he would see his caller at once.

Hamilton Fount, entering Dale's office, appeared very much embarrassed. He explained who he was in a jerky fashion, while his face grew red and his fingers played with his hat.

"Please sit down, Mr. Fount," said Dale. "Of course I know who you are. And I presume that Mr. Pryde or some one at Hillcreast has told you how I happen to be concerned with what occurred there Sunday night."

"They have,—he has," said Fount. "Mrs. Fount and I are staying there at present."

There followed a silence, while Dale surveyed the

calendar on his desk and Fount turned his hat slowly round and round in his hands.

"You talked with my wife yesterday, I hear," said the caller presently.

"Yes," nodded Dale. "Miss Pryde and I had a short talk with her."

"So she told me." Another pause. "Well, as a matter of fact, I did have a chat with Wykoff Sunday night."

Dale swung his chair round. "About money matters, I suppose; about his investments?"

Fount lifted his eyes from his hat. "I don't know how to account for it, Mr. Dale,—I'd talked to Wykoff during the afternoon, and he seemed perfectly sober,—but when I met him up in the library after supper he was—well, very much excited. Yet I didn't see him drink much down-stairs."

"Perhaps he was worried. I understand he needed money."

"No, I shouldn't have said it was exactly worry. I've known him for quite a long time, and I'd never seen him like that before. Angry and—queer. I couldn't make out what it was he wanted. . . . Yes, he did say something about money. He wanted a fairly large sum to protect his margins."

"Yes?" said Dale. "And am I to understand that he asked you to lend it to him?"

Fount mopped his forehead with his handkerchief; his eyes were so uneasy that the lawyer, in spite of what he knew about his caller, felt a twinge of pity for him.

“He did,” the banker admitted. “And I refused. I wish now that I’d been more considerate with him. I might have tried to do something,—particularly when he was so unlike his usual self. But the truth is he made me very angry.” Fount clutched his hat-brim again. “I’m a fairly quiet, good-natured man ordinarily, but when I get mad I’m afraid I boil over.”

“You two had a quarrel then?”

“Yes, we did. That’s why I shut the door. I didn’t want any one to hear the things he was saying.”

“And the quarrel led to blows?”

“Hardly to blows, Mr. Dale. I told him I didn’t want him to talk to me in that way, and I think I caught hold of his arm. He pulled his arm free and gave me a shove and said he’d talk as he pleased. He used pretty strong language. Then he went on, terribly excited, and shaking his finger in my face, and I took hold of his two shoulders and said, with a shove, that he’d got to hold his tongue. And then somehow he slipped on the floor and came down hard on the hearth-stone. Just as a man would if he slipped on a polished floor and lost his balance. And I—well, I

saw he was stunned, and—well, I thought I'd better get him some water."

Fount's eyes were fixed on Dale, the harassed and uneasy eyes of a person who is floundering and doesn't know where to get a foothold. Every incident he related might lead to so many implications, and admitting one fact might bring on a landslide that would overwhelm him.

Dale, keenly alert to the psychological impression the witness was making on him, felt that Fount, no matter what he had done, was neither inherently vicious nor criminal. A weak and unreliable character doubtless, but by no means a man of evil instincts.

"You went out of the library to get him a glass of water?" continued the lawyer. "Which way did you go?"

Fount hesitated. "By the door to the servants' hall."

"That seems rather odd, doesn't it, Mr. Fount? Weren't you more likely to find what you wanted if you went the other way?"

"It does seem odd. The whole thing seems like a nightmare to me now. I think it was because I didn't want any one to know what had happened; if I went out into the front hall I might have met somebody."

"And what did you do when you reached the servants' hall?"

"I fumbled along the corridor,—it was dark there. I was looking for a bathroom, where I might get a glass of water. I didn't want to be heard or seen. The door I thought was the right one was locked; so finally I came back to the library door again."

"Yes?" Dale urged.

"I looked into the room. Wykoff was lying just where he'd been before. And then I heard some one calling in the front part of the house. I shut the door, and went around through one of the guest rooms to the main hall. By that time some of the others had run up-stairs, and I joined them. And that's the truth, Mr. Dale, the solemn truth; as true as that I'm talking to you this minute."

Dale gave a nod and swung around to the window, thereby allowing Fount a chance to regain some of his composure. "How much better it would have been if you had come forward at once and told all that you knew," Dale said after a minute. "Undoubtedly you realize now that you've made your position a tremendously awkward one."

"I do," was the contrite rejoinder. "I was a fool, and I know it. I was going to tell Mr. Pryde all this when my wife told me about her talk with you."

"Did you tell this to Mrs. Fount last Sunday night?"

"I told her I had quarreled with Wykoff in the library."

Again Dale swung back, and now his keen eyes held those of Fount closely. "When you looked at Wykoff Jay's body, after the others had come into the room, did you notice anything about it you hadn't noticed before?"

"They had lifted him on to the divan; but I saw the wound in his head. His head wasn't like that when I left him lying on the hearth."

"You're sure of that, are you?"

"On my honor, I am. He got no such blow on his head when he slipped and fell on the floor."

"You didn't touch him yourself after he'd fallen?"

"I didn't. I just looked at him. I wasn't angry, I was cold sober then; I tell you I was frightened."

"Yes," said Dale. He allowed Fount to calm off for a minute; then went on:

"Some one had struck Wykoff Jay's head against the hearth with sufficient force to fracture his skull in the interval between the time when you went into the servants' hall and when you came back with the others; in the interval between when you left and when you looked in at the door and heard your wife's voice calling in the front hall, to be exact; that's your conclusion, is it, Mr. Fount?"

"It is. It must have been that way," the other answered positively.

"Did you see or hear anything while you were in the servants' hall that would give you any clue as to who that person might have been?"

"No. I'd shut the library door behind me, and I didn't hear anything."

"Did you start to go down the back-stairs?"

"I—I—yes, I believe I did."

"You heard some one in the room at the foot of the stairs, and so you changed your mind?"

"I may have. I don't know. The truth is I was terribly upset."

Dale turned to his desk, took a piece of paper from his wallet and laid it on the blotter. "The time is past for mincing matters," he declared. "You've put yourself in wrong; so wrong that I can imagine the police might want to hold you for further investigation. Yet I can see your side of the case. Mr. Jay—to call a spade by its right name—was trying to black-mail you."

Fount squirmed in his chair.

"He showed you this memorandum," the lawyer continued, tapping the paper with his finger. "'June, 1912. The Endicott Estate. Atlantic Trust Company.' You knew what that meant. No, don't interrupt me. I know what it means also. Jay had

access to facts that involved you in the mishandling of trust funds. The matter was closed up, without publicity. But those facts, if they came to light, would probably be most injurious to your present position."

"No one can prove them, Mr. Dale."

"I'm not attempting to prove them. Do you deny that Jay was attempting blackmail?"

"That's precisely what he was doing. That's what made me so mad."

"Very well then. That's your defense. It explains your quarrel. What you did, after he fell to the floor, is not so easy to understand. Common decency, it would seem, would have led you to pick him up and try to help him."

"I know, Mr. Dale, I know. I behaved abominably. I really don't understand now how I came to act as I did. But Wykoff had been so strange—not at all like his usual self,—and I was so afraid some one would think that I had knocked him down, and then this blackmailing story of his come out—— . . . Of course I know all that you or any one else could say about me—about what I did, I mean. But that doesn't alter the fact that I've told you the absolute truth, and every single thing I know about the affair."

Dale nodded. But, as he regarded this man who, he felt certain, had at least once in his business career been guilty of underhand practices, he could not refrain

from driving home the moral of what he had done. "It looks to me, Mr. Fount, as if this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't allowed your fears to get the better of your common sense."

Fount made no reply; he simply sat there, abjectly miserable and cast down.

After a moment Dale asked:

"How long a time do you suppose elapsed between the time when you left the library and opened the door again?"

"Ten minutes perhaps; possibly a little longer."

Shortly afterwards the caller left, still evidently doubtful as to Dale's opinion of him.

The lawyer, alone in his office, made scrawls and scratches and circles on his desk tablet. He was inclined to believe that Fount had told him the truth, though he thought it possible the banker had omitted some details. But if he did believe this story, where did it lead him? Jay was lying on the tiles, stunned. Fount had left by the door on the right of the fireplace, and had shut that door behind him. Ten minutes,—perhaps a little longer interval,—had elapsed before Fount looked in again. In that interval some one must have come into the library, killed Jay, and escaped.

That this was what had happened seemed scarcely credible; and yet, if Fount's story were true, what other explanation was possible? Follow it a step

further. The assassin must have come in by the front hall door and left again by that door, since Fount was wandering around outside the other door all that time. He must have escaped before Mrs. Fount came down the front hall from her own room. He had been surprisingly quick, surprisingly determined. He had instantly taken advantage of the opportunity spread before his eyes. But why in the world should any such person have wanted to kill Wykoff Jay?

This was not the deed of a mere thief. A thief would have had ample opportunity to rob Jay while he lay stunned on the hearth. It was the act of some one who wanted to kill the man. That some one had had immense, colossal nerve; for the chances were more than considerable that he might be seen as he left by the main door.

Dale went over what he knew about the whereabouts of Mr. Pryde's household that evening. "What was it Mrs. Fount said?" he questioned. "As she came along the hall from her room toward the library she said that the door of Mr. Pryde's room opened and that fellow Antonio Poppi looked out. Was Poppi establishing an alibi? He could have got from the library to Mr. Pryde's room in a couple of seconds. I wonder—I wonder. . . . Vindictive nature. . . . Cold blooded. . . ." Dale spread out his hands on the blotter. "I don't see any path through this."

But he was not the man to leave the field defeated; on the contrary Dale had a great deal of the bulldog in him. And presently he was reflecting, "Fount had much to say about Jay's acting queerly. Well, probably a man who was planning blackmail would be rather excited—unless he was an old hand. And yet Fount was impressed by that. And there's the fact that when he fell on the floor it knocked him out so completely. Was there really something queer about Jay, or was it only Fount's imagination?"

Dale's telephone bell rang, and he took off the receiver.

"Hello," said a voice. "Mr. Dale? This is Clarice Pryde."

"Yes. I was just thinking about Hillcrest."

"You were? Well, could you possibly come out here this afternoon?"

"I could. But what's the matter?"

"Mrs. Fount has told my uncle that she saw Antonio near the library door on Sunday evening."

"Yes, I know. At Mr. Pryde's door; so she said yesterday."

"Well, Uncle called Antonio in, and Antonio says he saw some one come out of the library and hurry down-stairs just before he saw Mrs. Fount."

"Yes. Who was it?"

"Nelson Lombard, he says."

“Nelson Lombard! Why, he was out in the summer-house with Mrs. Harper.”

“Antonio swears that he saw him; and I think that Uncle believes him. Can you come and help straighten this out?”

“I can come—and I will, Clarice.”

Dale hung up the receiver, and groaned. “Good Lord!” he sighed. “I was hoping we could keep the women out of this! But Lombard—and Mrs. Harper—and her husband! Kindle that fire—and who knows where may be the end of the conflagration? Poor old Pryde!—The deuce of a mess!”

VII

LOMBARD'S ALIBI

DALE got a hurried lunch and drove out to Hillcrest in the early afternoon. The crisp air of October cooled his cheeks and seemed to clear his brain, and as he turned his car in between the gate-posts and went up the drive between the flaming trees of the park he reflected that no matter how tangled the skeins of this mystery might be there must nevertheless be some method by which perseverance and intelligence could unravel them.

Clarice, who had been watching from a window, opened the door for him. "Uncle Melchior's in the drawing-room," she said. "He's questioning Nelson and Antonio."

In the large, formally-furnished room, where the portraits of earlier Prydes looked down from massive gilt frames, the owner of the house sat in a high-backed chair, his attitude reminding Dale of a mediæval nobleman about to give orders.

Tyrrel also was seated, his reflective face and relaxed attitude in contrast to the alert pose of Pryde. Nelson

Lombard, a cigarette in his fingers, leaned against the grand piano; and Poppi, solemn and respectful, stood a little advanced from the door.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Dale,” said Pryde, and added, “Clarice, I think we’ll excuse you. Please do go and take some rest, my dear.”

Clarice withdrew, and Pryde gestured the lawyer to sit down. “I think you know Mr. Lombard?” Dale nodded. “We are trying,” Pryde continued, “to learn something about what happened here on Sunday night.”

That this was not only a difficult, but also a very unpleasant, occupation was evident from the worried look in Pryde’s usually amiable face. He did not mean to shirk his duty, however; and after a glance at his servant he went on explaining to Dale. “My man Antonio says that he saw Mr. Lombard come out of the library a few minutes before Mrs. Fount went along the second-story hall. Mr. Lombard denies it. He says that he was not in the house from the time when he went outdoors with Mrs. Harper until they returned and found us all up-stairs.”

“The fellow knows it too,” Lombard struck in. “I saw him prowling around the grounds near the summer-house where we were sitting, and I’ll swear he saw me too.”

Pryde looked at Poppi, and the Italian answered:

"Yes, sir, it is true I was out in the grounds, but I did not see Mr. Lombard."

Lombard turned, red to the roots of his hair. "You did; and you know you did! You keep an eye on everything; you wanted to know where Mrs. Harper and I had gone, and you hunted about till you found out."

Pryde held up a hand. "Gently, Nelson, gently. I know Antonio better than you do, and he is not a spy."

"It seems to me," put in Tyrrel's calming voice, "that Mrs. Harper could readily substantiate all that Mr. Lombard has said. If she was with him during that time ——"

"I hate to drag her into this!" Lombard exclaimed. "It's putting her word against that of this man."

Dale read what was in Lombard's mind. Might it not be thought that Marian Harper would perjure herself to support his story?

"I hate it also," said Pryde. "This whole affair is most distasteful to me." His eyes sought those of Dale in a beseeching look.

"I think we will have to ask Mrs. Harper," said the lawyer. "But meanwhile, Mr. Pryde, I would like to know whether you remember seeing any one come down the front stairway while you were in the dining-room."

The owner of Hillcrest looked relieved; the disagree-

able business of questioning Marian was postponed at least for the moment. He relaxed and sat more easily in his chair, his face benignant as usual.

“That’s a matter I’ve thought about,” he said, answering Dale. “The dining-room doors were open, and, as you know, a person coming down the main staircase—at least when they reached the bottom steps—would be in full view of that room. I was sitting, as it happened, so that I faced the hall; and although I was talking to Mr. Harper, and must necessarily have looked at him often, I feel convinced that I should have seen any one at the foot of the stairs. I don’t recall noticing any one.”

“It’s very difficult to be sure on a point like that, Melchior,” interjected Tyrrel. “We all know,—and probably Mr. Dale can cite a hundred instances from his own practice,—how what appears at the moment only a trivial incident completely escapes our recollection when we think over a scene.”

“Undoubtedly, Ambrose. And yet that is my impression—I don’t recall noticing any one on the stairs.”

“Then how,” asked Dale, “are we to account for the fact that Poppi was out in the garden part of the time and later was on the second floor?”

The valet, suddenly the target of four pairs of questioning eyes, flushed under his olive skin. Would he say that he had entered the house by the service door

and gone up the back-stairs past the housekeeper's room? That was what Dale expected; and Dale thought that could easily be proved untrue.

Instead Poppi, looking only at his master, said in his even tone:

"I would remind you, sir, that I came into the dining-room while you were at the table and asked if you would have any further need of me that evening. You shook your head, and I went out and up the front stairs to your room to lay out your night clothes. I had come into the house by the kitchen door and so to the dining-room. I spoke to the cook as I went in."

"That's so," said Pryde with a smile. "I take Antonio's comings and goings so much as a matter of course they make no impression on me."

"Altogether too much as a matter of course," mumbled Lombard.

Outside there was the sound of a car; then Bramwell appeared at the door and announced: "Mr. and Mrs. Harper, Mr. Pryde."

"Well," said Pryde, "I suppose—we'd better ask them in here."

Harper came in, immaculately dressed in black morning-coat and gray trousers, his pale face seeming, as usual, to be harboring some brooding reflection. He made a stiff bow as he was presented to Dale, and then his small eyes roved inquiringly about the room,

not looking directly at any of the occupants so much as apparently seeking an explanation of what was in the air.

When Marian followed, Clarice came with her, close to her side. Dale, rising to acknowledge his introduction to Mrs. Harper, noticed the contrast in color between the two young women. Marian was a dark beauty, and the lawyer, observing her lovely brow, her deep, black-lashed eyes, the soft line of her throat, revealed by a collarless gown, understood how such a woman might readily chafe at her companionship with her reticent, brooding husband.

Mrs. Harper, moving as unconcerned as though there were no air of suspense in the room, sat down on a low sofa, and Clarice, at a nod from her uncle, seated herself beside her.

"This distressing business!" murmured Pryde. "All these questions—all these details! I wish, Mr. Dale, you would be so good as to tell them what we're discussing."

The situation was almost as hard for Dale. Instinctively he shrank from probing into the relations between the Harpers. Marian's eyes were on him; so too, he knew, were her husband's. This was delicate ground, where every step, every insinuation, might make trouble.

He told briefly what he had heard. "Antonio says

that he saw Mr. Lombard come out from the library shortly before ten o'clock last Sunday night. Mr. Lombard says he was not in the house at that time."

Marian looked at her uncle. "Nelson is right. I was with him all the evening."

Silence followed, an interval when it seemed as if every one were expecting some one else to speak.

It was Clarice who broke the pause. "I've said that Marian and Nelson went out at the front door while I was on the terrace."

"Nobody questions that, my dear," agreed her uncle. "But it might have been possible for Nelson to come in again,—through one of these French windows."

Lombard stepped forward, angry, his fists doubling. "It's the most ridiculous nonsense I ever heard! I won't be lied about,—the fellow's got some low motive!"

"How could he have?" murmured Harper. "Although I'll admit I don't see ——"

"No, you don't," snapped back Lombard. "What reason on earth would I have for injuring Wykoff?—It's a plot, a damnable plot! No one can prove anything; but they can say—or hint—any vile thing about me."

"There is no plot," put in Pryde, the peacemaker.

"Antonio must have been mistaken; he must have seen some one else."

Nelson shook his head. "No, sir, I believe there's some reason."

Marian stood up and looked at Poppi. "You saw me with Mr. Lombard in the summer-house that night. You came out to see where we were." She turned to her uncle. "I was there with Nelson all the evening; we came into the house together. And your servant knows it; he was spying on us."

"That's a hard word, my dear Marian."

"I can't find a softer."

Dale, watching her, could not help but admire her. She was throwing down her gage, and she did it with a gleam in her dark eyes that was magnificent. Her imputation was clear; some one thought that Lombard was her lover and wanted the proof of it.

"Marian," said her husband, "this is no time for heroics."

The dark eyes sought out the man, who, his arms folded across his chest, was leaning back in his chair. And abruptly Marian laughed, at first a light ripple, then almost convulsively; she drew her handkerchief from her gown and pressed it to her face.

"Heroics—no," she exclaimed. "This is the time for perfect self-control. Let's all of us keep our manners. Oh ——"

Clarice put her arm around her cousin's waist and drew her—Marian's shoulders still shaking—out of the drawing-room.

Dale caught the venomous look that Lombard cast in the direction of Harper, a look that was either not seen by the latter or studiously ignored. "And this, sir," said Lombard, turning and almost fiercely regarding Pryde, "this is what comes of admitting the prattle of outsiders"—his gesture indicated Poppi—"to family councils. I, for one, have had more than enough of it."

Thereupon, his appearance giving the impression that he would delight more than anything else in tearing some one—almost any one—limb from limb, he stalked to the door and went out.

Pryde looked completely discomfited and wretched. "You see, I told you ——" he said half aloud to Tyrrel.

"Never mind," the other responded. "But no more of this for the present. Antonio, you may go."

And a few minutes later Dale and the others were in the hall, where Pryde took Harper's arm and turned toward the terrace, as if seeking the relief of the outer air.

Tyrrel and the lawyer went into the writing-room. "Have a cigarette?" said the former. "This business is simply ruining my old friend's peace of mind.

He has always relied on Antonio's honesty as the corner-stone of his house. For a dozen years Mr. Pryde and I have lived together, and never in all that time, to my knowledge, has he caught Antonio in a lie. He won't know what to make of it; and I must admit that, whether we believe Poppi is telling the truth or not, the situation is quite incomprehensible."

"It is," agreed Dale. "What's your own opinion, Mr. Tyrrel?"

Tyrrel smoked for a moment in silence, his eyes fixed on the hearth, where a light fire burned. "I think Antonio must have been mistaken. I know nothing of the relations that existed between Jay and Lombard,—whether they were of a kind that might possibly have led to their falling foul of one another. But if what Lombard and Mrs. Harper have told us is not true, then Lombard must have come into the house by one of the first floor windows and crossed the lower hall to the staircase, and in that case it seems as if Mr. Pryde would have seen him. There are too many 'ifs' about it, to my way of thinking. No; of the two, I incline to believe that Antonio was mistaken."

"Lombard's a hot-tempered man."

"Yes," Tyrrel acquiesced.

"But the man who killed Jay acted in cold blood. It wasn't a deed of quick passion."

Tyrrel shook his head, and they sat in silence for

some time, each studying the problem that seemed as difficult of solution as ever.

Presently Dale shook himself free of his thoughts and glanced at the clock on the mantel. "Hello, it's almost five—I'd no idea it was so late." He walked over to the window. "It's getting dark; why, it looks as if it was going to storm. I ought to be starting home."

But he didn't turn at once. He stood there, looking out into the gathering dusk, puzzling, puzzling over these threads that he could not piece together, these wild guesses and conjectures that filled his mind.

When he did turn he walked back to the mantel. "Past five now," he observed, addressing the clock. "Well, good-night, Mr. Tyrrel. Don't come to the door. I can let myself out all right."

"Good-night, Mr. Dale. If you see Mr. Pryde outdoors you'd better suggest that he come in. Your climate here isn't what he's used to."

Dale went into the hall, which was not yet lighted. He verified the fact that the foot of the staircase was in full view of any one in the dining-room who might be looking in that direction. Then he hesitated; he would like to see Clarice again before he left; but he didn't want to ask a servant to find her for him.

She might be in the library, perhaps still with Mrs.

Harper. He went up the stairs and found the library door open. He looked into the room. Silhouetted against the darkening sky he saw Clarice sitting on the window-seat, her chin cupped in her hand, her elbow propped on the ledge.

"May I come in for a minute, Clarice?" he asked.

"Please do, Clement."

He stood beside her, noticing how weary and sad she looked.

"Poor Marian," she murmured. "Poor, poor Marian. Oh, what's to become of her?"

He could think of nothing to say.

"We came in here and talked," Clarice went on. "She didn't tell me much, but I can understand. . . . And now she's gone back to town—with her husband, I suppose. Oh, Clement, can you imagine what life must be to two people like that? His eyes always watching her, always suspecting things!"

Dale nodded. "I'm very sorry for her."

In a moment Clarice stood up. "And poor old Uncle Melchior! Why, this house must seem simply filled with tragic things to him. Please turn on the lights, Clement."

He stepped to the door and did so. Then, as he looked around the room, now fully illuminated, he said:

"I've been trying to remember something. There

isn't a door on the other side of that library closet, is there? "

"No; only the door from this side."

"That's what I thought." Dale, however, kept his eyes on the black walnut panels that marked the closet door and on the large globe that stood, apparently from long custom, immediately in front of it. "Nothing much in there, was there? Just the usual sort of things one finds in a closet."

"That's what you said the other morning, I think."

"Yes, so I did." Nevertheless, he moved the globe away and opened the door. The light from the wall-brackets in the library revealed the boxes, the typewriter on its table, the step-ladder, the tied-up files of old magazines and the other odds and ends he had seen in the closet before. He stepped in, Clarice now at his elbow, and together they looked about them. Then Dale struck a match and peered down at the floor.

"There's a cigarette in the corner," said Clarice.

"Yes. And there's a match,—a burnt-out wax vesta. Do the two go together? It looks like it, doesn't it?" Dale bent down lower. "See, the ash from the cigarette hasn't blown about,—it's still in a little pile where it fell. Can't have been there so very long, can it? . . . Odd that any one should light a cigarette in here, and then throw the match on the floor, and then the cigarette, only half-smoked."

He picked up the match and the cigarette, and taking an envelope from his pocket, placed them both in it. "Nothing more to be seen on the floor, is there?" he said, stooping again.

Suddenly he stood up. "What's that, Clarice?"

"What? I don't see anything."

Dale held up a finger. "Listen."

Directly above their heads sounded a drop, then another and another.

"Can it be a leak somewhere?" Clarice questioned.

Instead of answering her, Dale seized the small step-ladder, planted it on a big, flat-topped box, made sure that it was steady, and climbed up. Lighting a second match, he held it over his head. A dark blue strip of cloth, with little rings on each side that ran on a pair of wires, occupied part of the ceiling.

Dale pulled the cloth on the wires. "It's the sky that's leaking, not the plumbing," he announced. "Rain-drops on a skylight, Clarice. And here's a little bolt at the edge of the frame; and it's pushed in tight. Now that is interesting!"

VIII

A PAINTER'S PREDICAMENT

FROM the windows of his own private den at Rockledge, where Clement Dale lived with his father and mother, he could just see the chimney-pots of Hillcrest, now the trees were losing their leaves. Often he stood at a window and meditated, and the turns he took about the room were apt to end in a vigil from his eyrie, his gaze roaming the fields and woods searching for the house to which his thoughts had flown.

Clarice was living at that house now; her uncle had need of her, and she, having no close ties of her own, had tried to solace him. Melchior Pryde had lost his resilience; as Dale saw it the mystery that still shrouded the fate of Jay was not the only weight that bowed those formerly erect shoulders. There was the problem of Marian and Amory Harper, a marital situation unpleasant enough in itself, without the added complexity of Nelson Lombard's intentions. Relations were strained all around. It seemed to Dale, and he thought that it must also seem to Pryde, as if

it were only the recently returned uncle who now kept the discordant elements of the family together.

What a study in human nature! What a spectacle of flies buzzing about the honey-pot! All of them—except Clarice—were thinking of Melchior Pryde's fortune. The Founts had not loosened their hold; Josephine, clinging like a hard-shelled barnacle to a rock, still kept her self-appointed position of overseer to her uncle's comfort. She and Hamilton retained their rooms at Hillcrest; in fact had closed their house in town. She had grown more assertive, more pompous. She slighted Dale when she met him, as if to repay him for the unpleasant half-hour he had once thrust upon her. And Dale, with a smile, had more than once noticed how she jarred on the taste of Tyrrel; she would stay at the dinner-table while the gentlemen smoked, she would interrupt their stories, she would interject into their reminiscences of Fiesole her own opinions of the inefficient domestic economy of the Italians.

Hamilton, however, appeared to have lost some of his conceit. His manner was at times almost furtive; financial affairs were not so often on his tongue. Dale imagined that Fount wondered how many people had heard of his connection with the ill-starred Atlantic Trust Company, and how many knew that he had quarreled with Jay. The banker was not an agreeable

person to the lawyer, who avoided him whenever he could. And knowing that by now Pryde must surely have correctly estimated Fount, Dale was surprised at the former's constant courtesy to Josephine's husband.

Ralph Miles alone of them all—always excepting Clarice—seemed to Dale to be straightforward in his relations to Pryde. The big, hearty man was doing his best to amuse the owner of Hillcrest and distract his sombre thoughts. He made him go to the theatre three or four times, he motored with Pryde and Tyrrel, in the former's car, to country clubs to which he belonged, he brought out light gossip from town and uncorked it in the evenings. And Dale, though he knew that Miles had an unpleasant twist to his temper and liked always to be the top dog, felt that this nephew contributed more to Pryde's satisfaction in his new home than any of the other relations, with the exception of Clarice.

Time and time again Dale had gone over every point in the problem as to what had actually taken place in the library at Hillcrest on the evening when Jay was killed; he had certain bits of evidence, but they were, as yet, as unproductive of any rational conclusion as a message in cipher would be to one ignorant of the code. The police had discovered no one, either inside or outside the house, against whom they could bring a legitimate charge. They appeared to have

lost interest; and for the matter of that many a man in Dale's position would have felt justified in going to Pryde and admitting that the problem was beyond his powers.

That was not Dale's disposition, however. His natural tenacity, moreover, was reinforced in this case by a feeling—indefinable, but none the less strong—that it was imperative that some one on the outside should keep an eye on the group at Hillcrest and put in a word of advice or caution in case of need. How far this feeling was due to the fact that Clarice Pryde was one of the group he did not attempt to define; her uncle was still his client, and he let it go at that. But this had become much more than a matter of business to him. The state of affairs at Pryde's house now filled the most of his thoughts in his waking hours and even stole into his dreams.

He had engaged a reliable man, Samuel Drake, who had done considerable private investigation work for Dale's firm, to look into several matters for him. Drake's report as to Wykoff Jay's affairs, so far as he could ascertain them, furnished no information that seemed to throw new light on the tragedy.

As to the servants at Hillcrest, Drake's search, thorough and painstaking, appeared to provide each one with a clean bill as to reputation and conduct. Bramwell was ultra-respectable, his references all gilt-

edged, never had there been a whisper raised against him. Lyddon, the gardener, was a grandfather, his home life a model, his neighbors devoted to him. Jenkins, the second man, had been born and brought up in Philadelphia, was supporting his mother and was engaged to a girl who worked for a milliner in town. He was honest and decent and straightforward. Pryde's chauffeur, Somers, had only come from England with his wife and two small children the spring before, but his record showed no bad habits. In short, there was nothing that might lead one to believe that any of these men would so far step outside his natural orbit as to conspire against Jay or seek to harm him.

Tom Hastings, the boy, and the women servants Dale dismissed from Drake's attention. This was not a matter to involve them, as he saw it. He had eliminated them when he first studied the problem, and nothing had transpired since to recall them to his attention.

Dale sat at the writing-table in his den at Rockledge on a late autumn evening and thought over what he knew now that he had not known when Clarice had first sought his aid. There was Fount's story, the confession of a man with a guilty conscience, who was trying to explain a course of conduct that he must have felt would seem almost inexplicable to an unbiassed hearer. Over that Dale shrugged his shoul-

ders. Odd though it might have seemed to Fount, the very contrariness of the latter's conduct appeared to Dale the best reason for believing it.

Then there was the statement of Poppi concerning Nelson Lombard. That was a hard nut to crack. Lombard had an alibi; sufficiently valid in most circumstances, slightly lessened in this case on account of Marian's evident interest in him. But why should Lombard have attacked Jay? "No," thought Dale, "that's the wrong way to look at this. Why should any one have attacked him—except possibly Fount, driven mad by the threat of blackmail? The question is: Was Lombard in that room? Poppi says he was. Why should Poppi have said that, if it was not true?"

That turned the searchlight on Poppi. He had been for years in the service of Melchior Pryde, and Pryde trusted him implicitly. But did it follow that Antonio was impeccable? He might be as regards his master; but not as to other people. And Dale reflected on the glimpse he had caught of Harper twirling his penknife, turning with a face of fear, becoming calm again, and handing Poppi money. Might the relations between Harper and Antonio have something to do with Antonio's charge against Lombard?

But even if that were the explanation and Harper and Poppi were both rascals it brought one no nearer to understanding what had happened to Wykoff Jay.

Had not the whole puzzle been altered by the rain-drops Dale had heard on the roof of the library closet? It seemed to Dale that it had.

That trap-door on to the roof, the step-ladder, the cigarette, the match—all pointed in a new direction. There was now a third entrance to the library and a third exit as well. And some one had been in that closet long enough to light a cigarette, smoke it part-way, and throw it on the floor. A curious proceeding that. And it seemed more and more curious as Dale studied it.

But of what value as a clue was the trap-door actually? It bespoke a certain familiarity with the architecture of Hillcrest on the part of any one using it; but beyond that it appeared only to lead to the roof and to two other trap-doors in distant parts of the house.

Dale had investigated that point. On the second day following his discovery he had climbed on to the roof from the library closet and studied the region of chimneys and skylights. He had found that a second trap-door led down into a storeroom, at present filled with trunks, and that a third gave access to a small linen-room at the end of the servants' hall. It did not seem to him possible for any one, no matter how agile, to have descended over the cornice and down the side of the house; but that would not have been necessary; the other two exits would have been quite suffi-

cient; a man making use of either of them would have had ample opportunity to hide in the house until the coast was clear for his escape.

But the user of the trap-doors must have been some one familiar with the house, and some one who had returned to the library later and fastened the bolt on the inside of the closet skylight. Going over that feature of the problem again and again Dale came to the conclusion that the man who had killed Jay had been hiding in the closet while Fount and Jay were quarreling by the hearth—probably with the door open sufficiently to hear what was going on—and had come out when Fount had left the room, found Jay on the floor, committed the crime and escaped by the closet trap-door. Yet it remained an extraordinary, inexplicable thing that such a person should have been waiting, expectant, for such an unforeseeable situation. Who could that person have been? Every man in the house was accounted for elsewhere, except possibly Ralph Miles, who was said to have been inspecting the wine-cellar. And Dale had discovered in an offhand talk with Miles that he did not smoke cigarettes. Every other man in the house did smoke them sometimes, but none was in the habit of carrying wax vestas.

On this evening, as Dale again went over the whole puzzling situation, there came a knock on the door of his room, and the housemaid entered with a card.

"The gentleman would like to see you for a few minutes," she said.

Dale read the name. "Will you show him up here, please?"

Soon afterwards the caller appeared, and Dale held out his hand cordially. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Kelley. Sit down and have a cigar. This is my private sanctum."

Pip Kelley was pleased. The amiable young lawyer and the informal room both made him feel at his ease. "I don't often smoke cigars," he said, "but these look mild enough;"—and he helped himself and sat down in a Morris-chair.

"Cigarettes, eh?" said Dale, resuming his seat before the writing-table. "Funny thing, but I was thinking about cigarettes just now—and about wax vestas. Vestas aren't used much nowadays, are they?"

"Some women have a fancy for them," Kelley answered. But the subject of Dale's reflections evidently did not interest him. "I ought to apologize for hunting you out at your house," he went on, "but the fact is I didn't want to go to your office. I need a little advice."

"Yes," said Dale, wondering what was coming.

Kelley swung one leg over the other. "It's a personal matter; but I didn't know to whom else to go.

Clarice Pryde thinks you're a good one to confess to."

"Does she? Well, she doesn't tell many of her secrets to me. But then I don't suppose she has any sins on her conscience."

"No, that she hasn't. I tell you, Mr. Dale, that she's far and away the best of the whole lot of us—I mean the family connection, you know."

"Well, I agree with you. However, you're not all so black."

"Not black perhaps, but gray, bordering on sepia. That's the way with the rank and file of human beings, I suppose. Take me, as an example. I've got myself into a pretty pickle. There's a woman,—a model,—who's threatening to sue me for breach of promise."

"Heigh-ho!" thought Dale with a groan. And aloud, he asked: "A model? Professional model, you mean?"

"Not exactly. She hasn't posed for many painters; I'm not certain than she has for any but me. It was Ralph Miles who introduced us."

The lawyer carefully relighted his pipe, and smoked for several minutes in silence. He had a strong desire to take his caller by the shoulders and shake him until he howled. The young fool! The young ass! The young dauber of pigments, who hadn't the sense to keep his eyes and his thoughts on his canvas, but must try

his powers of attraction on his pretty sitters. For in Dale's opinion Kelley, no matter how innocent his intentions might be, was the sort who couldn't resist a game with the opposite sex. And breach of promise cases, to Dale, were always vulgar.

The lawyer checked the impulse, as he often had to resist the desire to tell clients his real opinion of their actions. "Has she got any letters from you?" he asked. "That's the usual play they make in such cases."

"A few, I believe. They don't amount to much. I never was serious, not the least bit serious, with her. I took her out to lunch sometimes, and once or twice to dinner. Every painter does that in Paris, when he likes a girl; but people are so beastly puritanical over here that if you're seen with a woman who doesn't belong to your own set they start in to talk about you. This girl was lively and good fun,—rather smart looking too; where's the harm in loosening up a bit and being human, when you've worked like a slave for hours at a stretch putting her on canvas?"

"That's understandable, of course." Dale couldn't refrain, however, from adding: "The difficulty with a portrait painter, I suppose, is in keeping his admiration for the beauty of his model out of his eyes when he's finished his work. It's like an actor going on with his part after he's left the stage."

“Exactly, Dale. You’ve hit it. It doesn’t seem human to treat a woman as only line and color. And Pauline seemed to expect some such attention. Of course I paid her just like any regular model; but still she was different from the usual run. She’s had a good education; she comes from respectable people.”

“Well,” said Dale, “how does this precious lady make out that you promised to marry her?”

“Heaven knows!” groaned Kelley. “I never said a word about marriage. I never thought of such a thing. You can imagine my sensations when she bounced into the studio a couple of weeks ago and said that, now we were engaged, she thought it was only right we should tell her family. I said, ‘But, my dear Pauline, we’re not engaged. Whatever put such a notion in your head? I haven’t the least idea of being engaged to anybody for years.’ And then she started in, and said I’d kissed her and written her affectionate letters and led her to believe my intentions were honorable. And she said she’d thrown over another man on account of me, and then she began to cry, and—well, there was the devil of a rumpus! After a long time she marched out, saying she was going to a lawyer, that she’d have some balm to salve her wounded affections.”

“Have you heard from her lawyer?” Dale asked drily.

"Not yet." Kelley had let his cigar go out, and now sat forward, frowning. "But I have heard from Ralph Miles. He took it upon him to come to my rooms and give me a fearful lacing with his tongue. Pauline had been to him, and pictured me, I suppose, as all kinds of a devil. He said she was an innocent girl, and that after the way I'd treated her the least I could do was to offer to marry her. I told him he was a fool, and that such a marriage would ruin me. He said that if I kept on as I was going, no respectable people would want to have anything to do with me anyhow."

"Yes," said Dale. "Here, light your cigar." He held out a match to Kelley, whose hand was shaking. "Remember words don't break any bones. Take it easy, old man, take it easy."

Kelley puffed for a minute, jerkily. "I never did her any harm. I swear I never did, Dale. Good Heavens, I'm not a libertine just because I'm a painter."

"I believe you, old fellow. Unfortunately we're none of us proof against slander." Dale, though he did believe that Kelley's philandering nature had led him to overstep bounds, did not believe that he had much harmed the model.

"That's all very well," the painter went on moodily, "but the trouble is that the two of them—Pauline and

Ralph—can get me into hot water. As it happens, there is a young woman—seriously a young woman—I—I—well, you can guess.”

“ Oh,” said Dale, and instantly thought of Clarice.

“ One I really do care for. Suppose she should hear of this? And I think Ralph has an inkling of the matter.”

“ If she cares, she’ll probably understand your explanation. The situation’s not absolutely unique, you know.” Dale could not keep a cold tone from his voice. So Kelley, caring for one woman, could not resist playing with another. Suppose that woman were Clarice? There was no reason why Dale should think it might be Clarice, except that Pip Kelley knew her well, and that she seemed to Dale so desirable.

“ You see? ” said Kelley. “ I can’t have this sort of story getting out, even if it’s absolutely unfounded, absolutely a hold up, as it is in this case.”

“ Oh yes, I see.” Dale decided that even if it were Clarice whom the painter had in mind, she couldn’t possibly seriously think of marrying such a fellow. “ It’s a pity you didn’t consider all these contingencies while you were admiring Miss Pauline,” he observed aloud.

Sarcasm, however, was completely lost on Kelley. The awkwardness of his own situation absolutely blotted out every other thought. He was indeed so

absorbed that he now held on to no reticences whatever, but revealed himself with surprising frankness.

"And there's my uncle, Mr. Pryde. As you know, he's got all kinds of money. I was going to ask him for a loan, when I got things properly fixed. I'm the only one of the family with real ambition; I've talked to him a little about my career; and I feel that he's interested in seeing I have a chance to develop my talent. But if he hears this story, that a girl who's been my model is threatening me with breach of promise, what'll he think of me then? My uncle's a bachelor and he's spent most of his life abroad, but it won't be a very pretty tale, even for his ears, after Ralph Miles has doctored it up a bit."

"Ralph Miles again! Has he got it in for you as bad as all that?" Dale demanded.

"Don't you know Ralph's game? I thought you'd been around Hillcrest enough to see what he's up to. He's just laying himself out to be nice to Uncle Mel and Ambrose Tyrrel. There never was such a genial, honest fellow,—a regular man's man, and all that. He's edging the others away, and pretty soon he'll have Uncle Mel where he wants him,—Ralph's name in his will, or a good-sized present. It's all clear enough to me."

Dale looked up at the ceiling, blowing smoke-rings

that floated lazily away. And Kelley's high-pitched, querulous voice went on:

"The Founts are in wrong. Uncle Mel's got something against Hamilton; he doesn't like him,—thinks him a wind-bag, I guess; and Josephine is too bossy,—men like my uncle and Mr. Tyrrel aren't used to being treated as if they were babes in arms. And Lombard and the Harpers; that's a difficult situation; he doesn't like that at all,—though I think he sides with the husband. Well, that leaves me. If Ralph can only put me out of the running, he'll have the game in his hands. Why, do you know, Dale, there are times when I positively believe that Ralph introduced Pauline to me, and coached her as to what to do, just so he could have something on me. He's capable of it. He's cold-blooded as the devil."

"But there is still Miss Pryde."

Kelley sat back, drawing breath. "Yes, there is still Clarice. And I don't see how Ralph or any one else can come between my uncle and her. Yet I wouldn't put it beyond Ralph. He'll wait for his chance. Clarice is too proud to play Ralph's game. She has no ax to grind. And Mr. Tyrrel likes her,—better than he does any of the rest of us, I think. She's got a strong friend in him, and whatever Tyrrel says goes with Uncle Mel. Still, it's a mixed-up business."

It was a mixed-up business, Dale reflected. And on the heels of that thought came the determination to keep Clarice out of the perils to reputation that seemed to ambush Hillcrest. No one should take advantage of her if he could help it. Yet it was absurd to think that such a woman as she could possibly be in any peril. Dale knew how close was the bond between Clarice and her uncle, with what a manifestly friendly interest Tyrrel regarded her,—this last had caused an occasional twinge of jealousy on Dale's part,—and this knowledge now reassured him.

“Dickens of a mess, isn't it?” Kelley's words broke in on the lawyer's reflections.

Dale nodded. He knocked the ashes from his pipe and placed it on the table. “I was called in to help your uncle, to see if I could assist in clearing up the mystery at Hillcrest; but it seems that I'm to become involved in all the family's tangles. Have you any reason to believe that Miles has told this story about you and the model to Mr. Pryde or to the lady you mentioned?”

“Not to the lady. I hardly think he'd tell her, that wouldn't help his plans. No, she isn't in town now; she's been away on a visit the past month.”

Dale's heart gave a leap,—unreasonable perhaps, considering what he had already decided Clarice's feel-

ings for Kelley must be,—but nevertheless a leap. He felt distinctly more cheerful.

“Well, we’ve got to chance Miles’ having spoken to Mr. Pryde about it. Your uncle may not be as guileless as you think; he wouldn’t be apt to rate Miles higher for telling tales out of school. If Miss Pauline says anything more to you, or her lawyer writes you, just refer them to me.”

“All right, Dale. You’re a good fellow. It’s done me a lot of good just to tell you about it. I’ve been rather provoked about Ralph. You see, if a vicious fellow thought Uncle Mel liked one of us more than another he might ——”

They had risen. Now Dale interrupted.

“Look here, Kelley, don’t get the habit of suspecting that people are trying to injure you. It’ll do you more harm than anything they can say.”

“I know you’re right. Thanks, Dale. You must make allowances for me. The artistic temperament ——”

They went down-stairs and the lawyer saw his caller out at the door. Standing alone on the front step in the starlight Dale turned over in his mind a thought that Kelley had left with him. Could it be possible that the man who had killed Wykoff Jay had done it to get rid of a rival to Pryde’s favor? This was a new angle to the puzzle, with several points that might well be considered.

IX

THE SECOND CRIME

It was on the Sunday night following Pip Kelley's call that Dale, as he was reading in the library at Rockledge, heard the telephone bell ring near his elbow and lazily took up the receiver. On the instant he didn't recognize the voice at the other end, a heavy, solemn voice, inquiring if the caller might speak with Mr. Clement Dale, the lawyer; and, not wanting to be interrupted in the book he was enjoying, Dale answered impatiently. "Yes, yes—this is Mr. Dale. Who is it calling?"

"This is Bramwell, Mr. Pryde's butler. Mr. Pryde would like you to come to his house at once, sir."

"You mean to-night, Bramwell?"

"I mean immediately, sir. It's most important."

"Nothing wrong, is there?"

"Mr. Pryde said I was to telephone you to come at once, sir," the stubborn voice repeated. "I can't say exactly what's the matter."

"All right, I'll come." Dale replaced the receiver and glanced at the clock. It was half-past ten. He could hear the wind whistling outside the house; it was the first real taste of winter.

“Mr. Pryde wants to see me,” Dale said to his mother, who was sitting on the other side of the lamp. “I’ll have to go over to Hillcrest. I hope he isn’t in any more trouble.”

“Poor fellow. It hasn’t been very pleasant for him since he came home,” Mrs. Dale responded. “Dear me!—a lawyer is as apt to be called out at all hours of the night as a doctor. Wrap up warm, Clem.”

Dale kissed his mother and left the cheerful, lamp-lighted room for the cold and storm-swept outdoors. From the garage he got his faithful car. In big fur-lined coat he sat at the wheel and carefully steered over the narrow driveway to the highroad. His headlights bored a hole through the dark; everywhere else was blackness. Through the trees the wind howled, shrieking in an eerie chorus.

“More trouble at Hillcrest!” The purr of the motor hummed that, the wild night dinning it into the ears of Dale. There must be trouble or Melchior Pryde would not have routed him out at such an hour. Serious trouble, it must be. Dale pressed harder on the accelerator. Clarice was at Hillcrest;—had some harm come to her?

The headlights turned in between the gate-posts, and shortly their bright rays brought the steps and the terrace in view. The brakes ground to a standstill,

and Dale jumped out. With long strides he hurried to the house.

A ring at the door and the door was opened by Bramwell. Before Dale had time to take off his coat Clarice appeared on the stairs. He went to her quickly. "What is it, Clarice?" he asked.

"Nelson Lombard — . . . He's been stabbed . . . killed."

Dale shivered. His greatcoat, held on his arm, slipped to the floor. "Lombard . . . stabbed . . . killed . . . in this house?"

"In the library—just like Wykoff." Suddenly she sat down in a hall chair and hid her face in her hands.

Dale pulled himself together; methodically laid cap and greatcoat and gloves on a chest, and stood a moment looking at the shaking girl. "Be brave, Clarice dear. I don't want to distress you. Where is Mr. Pryde?"

"Up-stairs. Oh, it's dreadful, terrible. Poor old Uncle Mel." In a moment she looked up, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, and got to her feet. "You must excuse me, Clement;—but this is so shocking. . . . And after the other too. . . . There. I'm myself now. Oh, here comes Mr. Tyrrel."

Dale turned to the staircase, down which the tall figure of Tyrrel was descending. His face was pale,

almost haggard. "Clarice has told you?" he said. He shook his head. "There's no doubt about it. . . . Nelson Lombard."

A question was on Dale's lips, a question he hardly dared frame. Tyrrel read it and answered. "We don't know who did it. We only know that he was stabbed with a dagger."

Dale wondered if that was the truth:—was there no clue this time either?

"Not suicide?" Dale muttered.

The other man shrugged his shoulders.

"No, not suicide," Clarice whispered. "Nelson wouldn't do that. He wouldn't do that; and certainly not in this house."

"I think that's right," agreed Tyrrel.

"The police?" said Dale.

"The lieutenant is here now," Tyrrel answered. "Oh, my poor friend, Pryde! One horror on top of another!" His face expressed his emotion; for an instant Dale felt the strength of the friendship that bound these two men together.

"Mr. Pryde is in the library with the lieutenant?" Dale questioned.

"They are all there," answered Tyrrel. "Harper and Miles and Kelley. They were all here for Sunday supper."

"And the Founts too," put in Clarice. "All of us

were here except Marian. She's ill in bed with a cold."

Dale looked at Clarice, and the stupefaction and horror he felt at what he had just heard vanished before solicitude for her. Her face was strained and weary, her eyes were full of appeal, like those of a hunted thing. Yet she held herself bravely. "Will you wait for me in here?" he said, pushing open the door of the writing-room. "There's a fire on the hearth. Shan't I ask Bramwell to get you a cup of hot coffee?"

"All right, Clement, I'll wait. No, don't bother about the coffee. And do help Uncle Melchior all you can. I think that you're the best prop he has,—you and Mr. Tyrrel."

With Clarice ensconced before the fire, Dale drew the door partway shut, as if to secure her at least temporary protection from the horror in the house. He turned to Tyrrel, whose eyes were brooding over some unspoken thought. "A woman oughtn't to be brought face to face with this sort of thing," said Dale. "It's bad enough for a man."

"It'll be too much for Melchior," said Tyrrel.

"It might well be. The tragedy . . . and then the damnable suspicions!" Dale groaned. "Don't they know anything about it?" And when the other man had shaken his head the lawyer laid his

hand on Tyrrel's arm. "Is it possible that you don't suspect any one? You were right here in the house—you know what's been going on—haven't you any ideas about it?"

"I haven't had time to think."

Dale gave an impatient grunt. Tyrrel's brain either worked very slowly, or he was averse to expressing any definite opinion. "I'll go up-stairs," said the lawyer. "The lieutenant may have learned something."

To Dale's relief the police lieutenant and a deputy coroner were the only occupants of the library when he and Tyrrel entered. The others had been herded into Pryde's sitting-room, their evidence apparently having as yet thrown little light on the situation. Dale introduced himself as Mr. Pryde's lawyer, and received a curt nod.

Lombard's body lay on the divan, where it had been placed after being lifted from the rug in front of the hearth. As Dale stood near the door, his eyes roaming about the room, he was vividly struck with the similarity between this tragedy and the one that had befallen Wykoff Jay. He found himself saying: "I suppose some one came into this room, discovered the lights turned on and Lombard lying on the floor."

"Peter Kelley found him," said Tyrrel.

"And the weapon?"

The coroner turned round. "He was stabbed with some sort of small blade. We haven't found the weapon yet."

"How long before Kelley came in had he been stabbed, do you think?"

"Only a short time."

"There was nothing but the mark of the blade?"

"Nothing," said the lieutenant. "And so far as we can see nothing has been taken from him."

"You've found no clues?"

The lieutenant appraised Dale from head to toe, a cool, distant glance that made the young lawyer flush. "I'm not on the witness-stand, counselor," he said. "Clues are my private business. I've sent for a couple of my best men and all the people in this house are to stay here,—for the night, anyhow. Excepting yourself, of course. I don't suppose you have any information of use to me."

"I don't suppose I have," agreed Dale.

The two officials moved to the hall door, where they stood talking in low tones. Dale, beckoning to Tyrrel, went to the far end of the library and sat down on the window-seat. "Would you mind telling me what you know?" he asked. "I don't imagine the police would object to my sharing what's common knowledge."

"I'd been reading by the fire in the writing-room," Tyrrel answered. "Most of the others had gone into

the drawing-room after supper—we have it rather late on Sunday, you know—I think it was after eight o'clock when we sat down at the table;—and young Kelley had been playing the piano and Miss Pryde had sung a few songs. I was half-asleep over my book when I heard some one come hurrying down the stairs. I jumped up and looked out in the hall. It was Kelley. He called out, 'Something's happened to Nelson! He's lying on the floor in the library!' I came up here at once. I found Lombard just as you've heard, and I'd hardly more than bent over him when the others came into this room."

"Yes, yes," said Dale. "Well?"

"He'd been stabbed—killed—he lay on the tiles by the fireplace."

"And what had the others been doing?"

"Melchior and Miss Pryde and Mrs. Fount had stayed in the drawing-room. Kelley had said he wanted to write a note, and seeing me dozing downstairs didn't want to disturb me and so came up here—where he found Lombard. The other men had been in the billiard-room."

"The others," said Dale, "were Miles and Fount and Harper?"

"Yes;—I'm not sure about that, though. It seems to me ——"

But here Tyrrel was interrupted by the police lieu-

tenant. "Gentlemen," said the officer, "my men are here now and I'll have to ask you to leave the room."

The two on the window-seat rose. Dale would have liked to have had a chance to look about the library further, but he felt there was no use in opposing that brusque command.

He followed Tyrrel down the room, but couldn't resist stopping for a moment by the closet door. The globe, as usual, was pushed against the panel, but by reaching over it he laid his hand on the knob. A twist, and he discovered that the closet door was locked.

"Yes,—and I've got the key," said the lieutenant, catching Dale's eye as the lawyer turned about. "And what's more,—since it seems to interest you,—I'm going to lock this room up tight when I leave here to-night. You'll have to postpone your private investigation. Maybe I can arrange to let you have a look round to-morrow."

"All right, officer," said Dale amiably. "I've no desire to trespass on your duties."

When he reached the hall he found that Tyrrel and most of the others were going down the stairs. Through the open door of Pryde's sitting-room, however, he had a glimpse of the owner of Hillcrest sitting on a couch, his head clasped in his hands. Dale went in. "I came over to do what I could to help you, sir," he said.

Pryde raised his head. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes lustreless.

"Where is this going to end, Mr. Dale?" he exclaimed. "What have I brought on them all here? What does this mean? What *can* it mean? Is it some form of revenge on me?"

"There must be an answer to it, Mr. Pryde; we must get at the truth."

"But when?—when? First Wykoff, and then Nelson. . . . Struck down without any warning, under my very roof, with the house full of people. There can't be a murderer here. Oh, how can there be?"

There was no use to argue with him at the moment. "The truth will be known," Dale repeated. "I think you had better go to bed now, sir, and get what rest you can. Shall I send Antonio to you?"

"Antonio. . . ." Pryde's lips quivered. "What are they saying about him? There was trouble between him and Nelson before. . . . I never understood how Antonio could have said what he did. And Nelson distrusted him; he told me that he did; he wanted me to get rid of him. But Antonio. . . . Why, I've known him for years,—seen him every day,—know him like my own hand. There can't be anything crooked about him; there simply can't be!"

“You’ve never known him to give way to sudden anger or passion?”

Pryde hesitated. “Like most of his race he is capable of anger, a lightning-flash, gone almost instantly. But he has never been that way with me; he is always cool and quiet. The perfect servant, Mr. Dale, the absolutely perfect servant.”

“He is very observant,” said Dale, “very thoughtful;—not at all the usual servant.”

“No, he’s an intelligent man. I know he has read a good deal, and studies what he reads. At one time he was very much interested in biology and physics. I got him some books on those subjects. . . . But a more devoted man there never was. Nothing, absolutely nothing was ever allowed to come before his service to me.”

“Yes,” agreed Dale; “I have seen that.” There floated through his mind a possible analogy between Antonio and a faithful dog, so faithful that he resented any attentions to his master from other sources than himself. Servants, the most devoted, grew crotchety in time, imperceptibly to their masters, who saw them always through their original rose-colored glasses.

“Don’t harbor ill thoughts of Antonio,” begged Pryde. “Yes, I wish you would send him to me.”

Dale went out, but didn’t have far to search. On

the landing stood the servant, a tray with a glass in his hand.

"Mr. Pryde wants you," said Dale, wondering how long the man had been standing there.

"Yes, sir. I have a glass of cordial for him." With the slightest inclination of his head in Dale's direction, Antonio went in at Pryde's door.

On the lower floor Dale looked in at the billiard-room, where Miles, a cigar in his mouth, was prodding a big back-log into a blaze of sparks.

"Come in," said Miles. "I hear I must spend the night. Dreadful business, this. It'll go hard with Uncle Mel."

Was there a trace of callousness in the deep voice, or was it that Dale's imagination supplied it, remembering what Pip Kelley had told him about this cousin? Dale accepted the invitation, and sat down in a leather armchair. "You were here, in this room, with Mr. Fount and Mr. Harper most of the evening, I understand?" he said. "You don't know anything about what Nelson Lombard was doing up-stairs?"

"No more than you do; and that, I take it, is nothing at all." Miles seated himself heavily, and laid his large hand, ornamented with a good-sized seal ring on the third finger, flat on top of his knee. "I make no pretense to keeping track of all my relatives. However"—this in a somewhat mollified tone—"I under-

stand that you're my uncle's attorney, and I have no objections to answering any questions you want to ask me."

"You three had been here all the evening?"

"No, I can't say that we three had. I was here all the time. The ladies had gone with Mr. Pryde and Pip to have some music. I don't care much for music, so I floated in here. Bramwell brought in some ale." Miles indicated a stand on which bottles and glasses were still displayed. "And Bramwell lighted the fire. I'd been out in the cold most of the afternoon, and I thought I'd take it easy. Pretty soon Harper came in, and then Fount. They buzzed about, warming themselves, sampling the ale, telling stories. Fount sat down in that chair you're in. He's not so chatty as he used to be; doesn't talk so much about banking; no, Hamilton strikes me as a fellow who's got something on his mind and can't chuck it off. He just sat there, smoking, and looking as if he were—well, as if he were listening."

"I suppose he was listening, to you," said Dale.

"No, I don't mean that. As if he were listening—well, to the wind or something. In a brown study, I mean; not hearing what I was saying. And he used to talk a good deal. Well, well, it's none of my business, of course. I dare say the money market is enough to make any fellow see ghosts."

“But he was here all the time, until you went upstairs with him?”

Miles nodded. “Yes, Hamilton was. But Amory Harper wasn’t. He buzzed in and out like some sort of a fly.”

Dale waited, knowing enough not to interrupt a garrulous witness.

“No,” Miles continued, “now that I come to think of it, it might have been Amory who was seeing the ghosts. He’s always so quiet and shy, not a bit of a mixer; but to-night he kept breaking out with stories he’d heard. He strolled in here, looking rather pale; I remember I told him a glass of ale would do him a lot of good; and he said, ‘Perhaps it would; I’ll try it;’ and helped himself to a glass. He walked up and down beside the billiard table, sipping now and then, and when he came to this end he’d stop and say something, usually some joke he’d heard at his club. Fount said, ‘For goodness’ sake, Amory, do sit down and keep quiet.’ ‘I haven’t had any exercise to-day,’ said Amory. ‘The chill’s got into my bones.’”

“He didn’t say anything about Lombard?” questioned Dale.

Miles gave the other a sharp glance. “Catch Amory doing that! Has anybody ever heard him mention Nelson? No, sir, that’s not Amory’s way. It would have been a lot better for every one if he had,

if he'd talked straight out to Marian and Nelson. But he didn't. We all knew what he was thinking about, but he wouldn't speak about it, and so we couldn't. He's secretive to the last degree."

A log fell from the andirons, splashing sparks, and Dale reached for it with the tongs and put it back in place. When he resumed his seat Miles continued:

"Amory went out after a while, said he'd take a look at the weather. He came back in a few minutes, and finished his bottle of ale. Then he went out again, and this time I guess it was all of a half hour before he returned. He said something about having talked with Antonio. I remember I thought that a bit odd; but then I reflected that in a way Amory and Antonio are something on the same pattern—both of them a trifle spooky—and perhaps they were comparing notes on the conduct of us more boisterous people. After that he sat over there in the corner, not opening his mouth. He stayed there till Pip came in and we all hurried up-stairs."

"He was gone a half hour, more or less? And how long was it after he came back before Kelley appeared?"

"Fifteen—twenty minutes, perhaps." Miles carefully knocked the ash from his cigar and turned toward Dale. "You think he might have been up in

the library with Nelson? It's a natural thought, considering what there was between those two,—and I see you do know how matters were between them. But Amory hasn't the nerve to strike a man,—no, not with his fist, let alone with a knife. He might—I'm not sure,—but he might possibly lose his self-control enough to say something bitter; but never enough to lay hands on a big man like Nelson."

"Bitter words,—a blow from the other man,—an attack in self-defense?" suggested Dale.

"But the knife, man, the knife. Where would he get such a thing? Would he have carried it up to the library with him? There wasn't such a thing in the room,—not near his hand anyway."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I don't know for certain," Miles was forced to concede. "But I can't see Amory striking Nelson with any kind of a weapon. However, that's only my opinion. If he killed him and came down here and said nothing about it he's a colder-blooded man than I ever supposed him."

"Yet the police will say," Dale mused, "that Harper had a motive—the only motive that's apparent so far at least—and perhaps the opportunity—if he did go up to that room."

"They may," said Miles. "It's a horrible business—bringing in husband and wife and airing their

affairs in public. But, I say, Dale, does it strike you as only a coincidence . . . ? ”

“ What? ”

“ First Wykoff Jay, then Lombard? ”

“ It’s very singular,” Dale admitted.

“ Singular! It’s sinister! It’ll shake Uncle Mel. He’ll be seeing things now. And why shouldn’t he? We’ll all of us be doing it. I’ve got pretty fair nerve; but I don’t like this sort of thing.”

“ Yes,” said Dale. “ We must keep an eye on your uncle—and the rest of them too.” He threw his cigar away and stood up. “ Well, the police are in charge,—if that’s any comfort. And now good-night. I must be getting home.”

“ I suppose I might as well bunk right here before the fire,” responded Miles disconsolately. “ I don’t want to have any run-in with the authorities for trying to escape from Hillcrest against orders.”

Leaving the billiard-room, Dale was again in the lower hall, which was still lighted by the wall-brackets. Instead of turning to the front door he went into the dining-room, switched on the lights, and found a bell to summon a servant. After a couple of moments Bramwell came in from the direction of the pantry.

“ I’d like a glass of water please, Bramwell,” said Dale.

The butler returned with a carafe and poured out a

glass. Dale sipped the water slowly. "Mr. Pryde's wine-cellar—in spite of prohibition—seems to hold out pretty well," he observed offhand. "Mr. Miles tells me they had ale in the billiard-room this evening."

"It's Mr. Fount's wine-cellar, to be exact, sir," Bramwell corrected. "He brought all the wines and spirits and ales over here from his own house when they were getting Hillcrest ready for Mr. Pryde. Yes, there is still a considerable stock."

"Much used at supper to-night?"

"Mr. Pryde and Mr. Tyrrel had their usual glass of claret, sir. Some of the other gentlemen had whiskey at the table, and—yes, I think several of them had cordials at the sideboard before they left the room."

"Did Mr. Lombard stop at the sideboard?"

Bramwell reflected. "Yes, I think he did, sir. I remember his saying that he never missed a chance of that sort nowadays."

"And afterwards he went up-stairs?"

"I couldn't say about that, Mr. Dale. I didn't see him again,—that's all I know."

"None of the gentlemen were what you might call excited by their whiskies and cordials? Mr. Lombard, for instance?"

"No, sir, I don't think they were. Mr. Lombard was always a lively gentleman, you know."

“Was the cordial on the sideboard something very special?”

“A very fine brandy, sir. I have a bottle right here in the pantry. Would you care to try a glass?”

“No, thank you.” Dale replaced his empty glass of water and turned toward the hall door. “By the way, you haven’t had a man in to look at the clocks in the house since Mr. Pryde came home, have you?”

“Why no, sir, not to my knowledge. I hadn’t heard that any of the clocks needed attention.”

Dale smiled. “Perhaps they don’t. . . . Well, good-night, Bramwell. The police lieutenant gave me permission to leave the house.”

He didn’t leave immediately, however. As he reached the front door he hesitated and then tiptoed into the writing-room. Clarice was still in the chair before the fire. She was not asleep. She heard him and looked up.

“Going, Clement?”

“Yes. But I’ll be back in the morning. I hope you’ll get some sleep.”

“Have you—have you found out anything important?”

“I’m not sure yet. But I think I know what they’re going to find.”

“They? Who do you mean?”

“The police officials.”

She looked at him, evidently puzzled. "I don't understand, Clement."

"Never mind, Clarice. You're having enough trouble without worrying over speculations. That's my part of the work. And now won't you go up to your own room and try to get to sleep?"

Together they went into the hall, and Dale waited until the slim figure in blue—a figure that had become very dear to him—disappeared at the turn in the stairs. Then he walked to the front door, opened it, spoke to the policeman he found smoking a pipe in a sheltered corner of the terrace, and went out to his car.

He got in and started the motor. Looking up, he caught sight of a pale moon scudding through a wrack of chill clouds. "If only there had been snow to-day!" he muttered. "By Jove, if there had been I'd have gotten up on that roof to-night, police lieutenant or not!"

X

HARPER TELLS HIS STORY

DALE kept his promise to Clarice by going to Hillcrest the next morning—when, by the way, there was a light fall of snow, as if to mock the lawyer's wish of the night before,—but he was allowed to do little more than gather a few scraps of information from Clarice and two or three of the others. The police wished to keep the investigation entirely in their own hands. What had befallen Nelson Lombard had redirected attention to the earlier case of Wykoff Jay, and would attract widespread comment.

The newspapers were full of the Hillcrest mystery. Dale read them, however, without any enlightenment whatsoever. Never before had he been so struck by the fact that a vast deal may be said about a matter without any real approach to the kernel of it.

The police could pursue their Star Chamber methods,—and Dale was quite ready to admit that a certain amount of secrecy was essential to their success, although the bearing of certain officials was trying at times,—but they could not keep Dale from seeing Clarice. He knew that this was a help to her, because she told him so in more ways than one.

When he called that morning Clarice explained the state of affairs. "Uncle Melchior doesn't know what to do or think,—he roams around, muttering to himself. I overheard him saying to Mr. Tyrrel, 'Oh, if I hadn't come back—this might never have happened!' I'm afraid, Clement, it will drive him away from Hillcrest. . . . And the others are not much better. You wouldn't believe such a strange, uncomfortable feeling could settle down so quickly on people who've known each other for ages as we all have."

And after a minute she continued: "Take Pip Kelley, for instance. I tried to talk to him at breakfast;—not about this, but about a girl he told me some time ago he was painting at his studio—I only did it to make conversation and change his thoughts—but he grew really angry, asked me not to pry into his private affairs, and got up and left the room. I wanted to call him back and apologize; but somehow I didn't even dare do that, for fear of making things worse."

"You poor girl," said Dale. "Pip is very sensitive."

"And Josephine tells me," Clarice added, "that Mrs. Shanklin says the cook and Jenkins, the second man, have given notice,—they don't want to stay in this house. And Josephine's worried about her husband; after she went to bed last night she heard him walking the floor of his room hour after hour. Ham-

ilton hasn't confided in her lately, and now she doesn't know what he may do. She wants him to go with her to Jamaica for a rest if he can get away."

"Mr. Fount has been different lately," Dale agreed. "But Clarice, you mustn't try to carry all these burdens."

The glimmer of a smile was her answer. "Well, you see, I'm shifting some of them over to your shoulders." The glimmer vanished, the gray-blue eyes clouded. "But oh, Clement, think of Marian! I telephoned her this morning. Of course Amory is no help. And now everybody will be talking about her. And what can she do? Oh, if Amory had only been a different man!"

"She's in for a hard time, I'm afraid," said Dale. "And Mr. Harper may be in for a worse one."

Clarice's eyes widened; she laid her hand on Dale's arm. "The officers questioned him in the library for an hour this morning. But what can they think he knows? He wasn't there last night. He was with Ralph and Hamilton in the billiard-room all the evening."

"Not all the evening," Dale corrected. "I talked with Miles. Harper left the billiard-room for a half hour or so."

"But Amory ——"

"Yes, I know, Clarice. I know what you'd say

about him. But I believe that he had a talk—and not a very pleasant one—with Lombard in the library last night.”

Clarice was about to ask a question, but Dale forestalled her. “Come up-stairs with me, will you? We can’t go to the library; I suppose the police have that locked. I want to look at two parts of the house that I think are unoccupied.”

The large house seemed very quiet and deserted as the two went along the hall on the upper floor to a short ell built toward the south. Dale had familiarized himself with the plans of the first and second stories of Hillcrest; and he went directly to the door he wanted. This opened into a storeroom, and he closed the door when Clarice and he had entered. He pointed to a trap-door in the ceiling and to a couple of trunks that were piled, casually as it appeared, beneath it.

“You’re not going out on the roof, Clement?” Clarice asked, in surprise.

“It wouldn’t do very much good—now,” he answered, shaking his head. “It just started to snow this morning. The only footprints would be my own,—which might interest the police, but wouldn’t help me very much.”

Then he looked about the storeroom, at the tops of the trunks, at the floor, at everything in fact. “Very well,” he said at last. “I don’t see anything new here,

anything that hasn't been here for several days, I should think."

"What did you expect to find?" Clarice asked.

"I don't know," Dale admitted. "But you see this is one of the entrances to the library."

"How is it, Clement?"

"The trap-door in the library closet opens on to the roof, so does this one. And there's one other, in the linen-room at the end of the servants' hall."

Crossing the upper story, they went into the linen-room, the door to which, like that to the storeroom, Dale found unlocked. But beyond a folding step-ladder, now leaning against the wall, ordinarily used for reaching the upper shelves, and a door in the ceiling similar to the others, there was nothing to attract attention.

Clarice, who had been watching Dale's face, now broke forth. "Do you really think that the person who stabbed Nelson left the library and came back into the house by one of these trap-doors?"

"I think it very likely," he answered. "More than that, I think it equally likely that the person entered the library that way."

She stared at him in surprise. "But, Clement, if that's so, it looks as if the crime had been carefully planned,—the trap-door into the closet left unhooked; almost as if Nelson had been lured into the room."

Dale nodded. "Last night, when I was in the library, I found that big globe standing against the closet door, and I'm willing to wager that if I'd stepped into the closet—as I wanted to, but couldn't because the lieutenant objected—I'd have found the trap-door hooked and the step-ladder in a corner. If my theory is correct, Clarice, while you were all concerned at what had happened to Lombard, some very quick and resourceful person was very busy."

"But who?" trembled on her lips.

"I don't know," Dale conceded. "I'm not certain, of course; but I'm inclined to think that I've got hold of something important. I can't make all the pieces fit, but I'm hoping the police will help me."

"Why should they be able to learn more than you can?"

"I don't mean help me directly, but by clearing up some suspicions. You say they've been cross-examining Mr. Harper this morning."

Without more explanation Dale went out into the servants' hall, and there he and Clarice met Antonio coming up the back stairs.

"Please go on," Dale said to his companion. "I want a few words with Poppi."

When Clarice had walked on, Dale, his hands in his pockets, turned to Pryde's valet.

"You came up to the library last night—when they found Mr. Lombard?" he asked.

"I came up these stairs, sir," Antonio answered promptly. "I was in the housekeeper's room when I heard what had happened."

"And the library door on this side was closed?"

"Yes, but not locked, sir. Bramwell and Jenkins and I went in."

"Who was there when you entered?"

"All the gentlemen in the house, I think."

"Antonio, did you notice whether they were all at the fireplace end of the library, or were some walking about?"

The valet thought for a moment. "I think they were all at that end. Mr. Miles and Mr. Tyrrel were bending over Mr. Lombard, and those two gentlemen, with the help of Bramwell and me, lifted him on to the sofa. Mr. Pryde and Mr. Fount and Mr. Kelley were standing close by."

"What was Mr. Harper doing?"

Antonio's stolid face showed some perplexity. "I don't recollect Mr. Harper. He is such a—such a quiet gentleman."

"He might have been at the other end of the room for all that you recall?"

"You see, I wasn't noticing any of them very particularly, sir," was the evasive answer.

"All right. Had you been in the front part of the house during the evening?"

"Only in the dining-room, sir. I was helping Bramwell with the wine glasses. We're very particular with those glasses. More especially with the green cordial ones Mr. Pryde brought from Italy."

"What was in those glasses last night?"

"Brandy, sir. Some of Mr. Fount's brandy."

"Heady stuff, I suppose? Something rather intoxicating?"

"I shouldn't have thought so, sir."

Dale gave him a searching glance, but there was nothing in Antonio's face to belie Antonio's words. "Very well, that's all," said the lawyer. "I'm much obliged to you."

Poppi, however, had a word to add. "I don't remember any of the gentlemen speaking of it as heady," he volunteered. "They each had a glass of the brandy. I know that, sir, because I washed seven glasses."

Dale went on through the guest-room that, since the library was now locked by the police, was the passage to the front of the house. The question that he was turning over in his mind had something to do with his talk with Antonio: How had it happened that Lombard, a strong and vigorous man, had been

stabbed, with no apparent evidence of having put up a fight?

When Dale came back to Hillcrest late that same afternoon, an evening newspaper, containing all sorts of conjectures about the crime, stuffed in his overcoat pocket, the first person he saw, after Jenkins had admitted him, was Amory Harper seated in the writing-room. The lawyer immediately went in and held out his hand. Harper, seeming a trifle surprised,—his acquaintance with Dale having been of the slightest,—stood up to acknowledge the greeting. Dale noticed how cold the other man's fingers were, though the room itself was warm.

"A stormy evening," said Dale, throwing hat and overcoat on one chair and sitting down in another, close to Harper. "Have the police learned anything new to-day?"

"If they have, they've kept it from me." A pause, and then Harper rose, closed the door, and came back again. "I'm about all in, Dale, and that's the truth."

"I should think you might be." Dale spoke considerately, with more compassion for the other man than he would have expected himself to feel. "If I can help you ——"

"Good Lord, I'm not made of iron! Those fellows went at me with hammer and tongs. Damn it, Dale, they tried to make me admit I did it!"

"I supposed they would."

Harper stared at the lawyer, and then his gaze turned to the floor and he bit his lip. "Every one thinks I did? You do? The newspapers? Because there was bad blood between Nelson and me? . . . All you need to condemn a man is to find a good reason to accuse him."

"I haven't said what I think," Dale reminded him gently. He leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and appeared completely at ease. His method was the opposite of the hammer and tongs. He attempted—and partly succeeded—in relaxing the tension of the man with whom he was dealing.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" he suggested. "It can do you no harm."

Again Harper scrutinized Dale's face. "What's your position in this matter?"

"Simply that of a friend of Mr. Pryde and his family. As you know, he asked me to give him some legal advice this autumn; so far my service has been small."

"Well," said Harper with a deep breath, "I never realized before that there are times when a man has got to talk to some one. I'm in that position now. Hammer and tongs couldn't make me. But I'm near the breaking point. And I'm—well, I'm very fond of Mr. Pryde;—he's been decent to me when all the

others turned the cold shoulder. And I know you're a friend of his. . . ."

Dale let him argue it out. And at last Harper nodded his head.

"I did quarrel with Nelson last night. We both were very angry."

A silence, and then the cool, questioning voice of the lawyer. "Was it by chance, or had you arranged to meet him in the library?"

Harper seemed surprised at the question, but after a second answered. "Nelson asked me if he could see me in the library; he said he had something to tell me."

"When did he ask you that?"

"He was walking around the supper-table and he stooped over my shoulder and spoke to me. I told him that perhaps I'd meet him. Then he walked on and talked to Mrs. Fount."

"Did any of the others hear what he said to you?"

"I don't know. I think they were all talking. Mr. Pryde was next to me, and he was chatting with Clarice. Mrs. Fount was on my other side, and she was busy with Mr. Tyrrel, at the end of the table."

Dale stretched his arms. "All right. And later you went into the billiard-room, where you joined Miles and Fount, and you were still considering whether you'd go up to Lombard."

“Yes, that’s a fact, I was. And after a while I did go to the library. Nelson was there, sitting on the divan, reading. I shut the door after me, and said, ‘What do you want?’”

There followed a lengthy pause, then Harper, apparently having decided to make a clean breast of it, went on. “You know about my wife. You were here that day in the drawing-room. Of course you know it hasn’t been the smoothest sort of sailing with us. Well, Nelson said that he’d thought things over and had about decided to go away. He said we seemed to have gotten into a position that was not only distressing ourselves, but all our friends as well. Mr. Pryde hadn’t spoken to him in so many words, but Nelson knew that his uncle was wretched about it. He didn’t see any other way out of it,—Nelson didn’t,—but to clear out for a while. I told him I thought he was right. I didn’t say much; I tried to keep very quiet. But somehow that didn’t seem to suit Nelson. He wouldn’t let me leave the room. He began to get—well, very dictatorial, very much excited.”

Dale was no longer lounging in his chair; his fingers wrapped around the arms as he bent forward. “Yes;—he was very much excited, was he? . . . Much excited? . . . Much more excited than usual?”

“Yes, he was,” said Harper. “It was only natural that a man should be embarrassed, and not quite his

usual self, when he was saying the things that Nelson had been saying to me,—I was very ill at ease myself. But it wasn't embarrassment with Nelson, or if it was he hid it under a strange mask. He grew very red in the face and ran his fingers several times through his hair, something I'd never seen him do before. And the gist of what he said was that, if he went away, I'd got to alter my relations with my wife, provide her with more money, and see to it that—well, in short, that I make myself over in a hundred different ways. I'd never been taken to task so in my whole life;—and the man who was doing it was a man who'd come between my wife and me!”

“Yes, yes,” murmured Dale. “I understand that.”

“I stood it for a few minutes,” Harper continued, “and then I got indignant. I told him to mind his own business. He made some hot retort. The next thing I knew he was calling me names. I got mad, I'll admit. I don't know exactly what I said; but he put his hand on me. I gave him a shove”—Harper indicated the action—“it must have been a harder push than I thought, for he staggered, and next minute he fell to the floor, doubled up, you know, just crumpled up, as if the wind had been knocked out of him.”

“You didn't hit him with your fist?” asked Dale.

“No, I struck him on the chest. And Nelson was a big man,—quite a boxer too; much more powerful

than I am. Yet I knocked him flat. He might have slipped on the floor. . . . But I can't understand it. He didn't just lose his footing; he went down like a log."

"And he didn't try to get up? He lay still where he fell?"

"Yes; he was stunned, he was knocked out. I don't see how it happened; but that's how it was. He lay there still, with his eyes shut. I never was so surprised."

Dale had leaned back in his chair again. "Don't let the blow you gave him weigh too heavily on your conscience, Mr. Harper. I think I can guess at what happened."

XI

OVER THE TEA-TABLE

HARPER was staring at Dale in the dusk that had settled on the writing-room. "You can guess at what happened? What do you mean by that?"

"When you bent over Lombard on the library floor did it occur to you that he had been drinking?"

"No, I don't think it did. And I don't believe that he had been; not to any extent."

"Not in the usual way, at least," said the lawyer. "I didn't mean to make any insinuations. And what happened next?"

"I was dumfounded, completely," came the slow, reluctant answer. "There was Nelson on the floor, apparently knocked out by my blow; and there was I, to all appearances guilty. I couldn't understand it at all. I tried to lift him up; I did prop him with his shoulders against the divan. But then I lost my nerve. It seemed as if I couldn't stay in that room any longer. I was thinking that any minute he'd come to, and that when he did and found that I'd knocked him down he'd be more angry than ever. I didn't know what he might say or do. Or what the others would think, considering the relations between us."

"So you ran away," said Dale curtly.

"I didn't intend to; but that's what I did," Harper admitted. "I thought I'd go out, find some one who would believe my version of what had happened and bring him back to the library with me. We'd fix Nelson up and, if possible, get him out of the house, and the next morning I'd go to see him and we'd have an explanation. I didn't want to trouble Mr. Pryde. If he heard that Nelson and I had come to blows he'd be fearfully upset. . . . Yes, as I think it over now, that was my real object. Mr. Pryde mustn't know; and I didn't see the least reason why he should."

It was always Mr. Pryde, Dale reflected. Each one of the family, except Clarice, was thinking of the impression he or she would make on this rich relation. And the result was always more distress for their uncle. The house was not only divided against itself, it was completely undermined by selfishness.

Harper continued: "I thought Ralph Miles was the man to help me out. He was strong enough to handle Nelson; we could take the car in the garage and get Nelson out of the house and make up some excuse for his having left. That's what I had in mind when I went down-stairs to the billiard-room. But unfortunately Fount was there, and I couldn't speak to Miles alone. So I sat down and tried to think of some

way of getting rid of Fount; I didn't want to tell him, —he was certain to tell his wife, and she would spread the story. And then the first thing I knew Kelley came down-stairs and told what he'd seen." Harper paused for a moment. "Nelson had been stabbed! He'd been stabbed while I'd been sitting there!"

"Well," said Dale, when the other's silence indicated he had finished, "if you hadn't thought only of yourself and hadn't closed the door, Nelson Lombard wouldn't have been stabbed."

Harper's hand touched the arm of Dale's chair. "Who did it? Who did it? Who found him there?"

"All the lights were on while you and Lombard talked?"

"Yes, I think they were."

"Did you look around the room? Did you notice where the big globe stood? Was the closet door shut?"

"I didn't look around. I was looking at Nelson all the time."

"If I only knew," said Dale, "whether some one went into the library after Lombard spoke to you at the supper-table, and before Lombard went up-stairs to wait for you, or even went in after he was there but before you entered!"

"You think that there was somebody hiding in the room while Nelson and I were talking?"

Dale avoided this question by asking another. "Naturally you've tried to learn what all the rest of the household were doing at the time when you left the library?"

"Yes, I have thought about them. They were all down-stairs, on the first floor."

"How do you know?"

"When I came down-stairs I wanted to make as certain as I could that no one would go up to the library until I'd had a chance to go back with Miles. The doors down here were open, and before I went into the billiard-room I glanced into the drawing-room,—Mr. Pryde was there, Kelley was at the piano, Mrs. Fount and Clarice were sitting on the sofa. I looked in here, and saw Mr. Tyrrel sitting in this chair. He was taking a nap before the fire; I remember his arm was hanging down over the chair-arm, and he had a book in his hand. And Fount and Miles were in the billiard-room when I went in there. That accounts for them all; except the servants. I don't know what they were doing."

"I can tell you what Antonio was doing—part of the time. He was washing Mr. Pryde's cordial glasses that had been set out on the sideboard."

This seemed to convey nothing of interest to Harper. "But I couldn't imagine any of them,—any of the family or any of the servants,—stabbing Nelson,"

he said. "Some outsider must have got into the house."

"And speaking of the cordial glasses," Dale continued, "did you drink any of Mr. Pryde's brandy before you left the dining-room?"

"Yes, I did; I had one glass. Bramwell had filled the glasses and set them on a salver on the sideboard. That's a custom on Sunday nights."

"Fine old brandy, was it? You liked the taste?"

"Yes, I should say that it was." After a moment Harper added, "But I don't understand your questions. I wasn't in the slightest degree intoxicated, if that's what you're thinking about."

"It wasn't," said Dale. "I feel certain that you were quite sober. And yet those brandy glasses do interest me,—and Antonio's washing them so carefully."

Another pause. Then Harper: "You suspect Antonio of something?"

"You remember that Lombard accused Antonio of spying on him in the garden."

Harper nodded.

"You remember Antonio said he saw Lombard upstairs on the night when Jay was killed. Why did he say that, Harper?"

"I—I don't know; I can't imagine."

Dale doubted the truth of this statement, but on reflection decided not to say so.

"I hadn't really thought of Antonio," Harper continued. "But perhaps you're right in wondering about him. Nelson didn't like him, it's true, and there may have been more bad feeling between them than any of us suspected. Yes, very likely there was. He has the run of the house. And Italians are free with their hands—and their knives, aren't they? No, I hadn't thought of him, but I can see—I can see ——"

His voice went trailing off, and after a short silence Dale, concluding that he had learned all Harper had to tell him, rose and turned on the light.

Harper blinked. "So—so you understand what I did?" he asked.

He was rather a miserable figure as he sat there, hunched up in his chair. There was little that was attractive about him, just as there had been little attractive in the story he had told. By contrast even Fount, after his confession of his treatment of Wykoff Jay, seemed more manly. Dale stuck his hands in his pockets. "I suppose I do understand it," he said drily. "But I'm sorry you acted as you did."

"I didn't knock him down."

"Your blow sent him to the floor."

"Well—well, my blow couldn't have stunned him."

"Perhaps not. No, it wasn't your striking him

that one has a right to complain of,—it was the fact that you thought of yourself, and yourself only, every minute after that.”

And when Dale had left Hillcrest and was in his own room at home it was that fact of panic, of selfish fear, first in the case of Fount, now in that of Harper, that dominated his thoughts. Fount had abandoned Jay when the latter was helpless, and Harper had done the same thing to Lombard. It was a curious coincidence, and yet Dale believed that both Fount and Harper had actually acted as they had told him.

Presently Dale considered the facts as he had come to know them. The police would, of course, have investigated the whereabouts of each person in the house. All the members of the family appeared to have alibis; Dale imagined that each of the servants would be found to have equally valid explanations of their actions. He must work this out on a different plan, by a different method from the one the police would employ. And he had several lines of study that seemed to him important.

He went to a friend who taught chemistry at the University and had a long talk with him, and then he went to a library and pored over various abstruse texts. As he read he made notes, and at night, in his den, he studied these and his resulting theories reminded him of strange tales from a mediæval cloister.

Meantime the eight days' sensation ran its course in the papers, and the Hillcrest mystery passed from a focus of curiosity to a page of history. Only once during that time did Dale see Clarice, and that was when she made an appointment with him by telephone to meet her at a quiet tea-shop.

They had a table in an alcove, out of earshot of other customers, and when the tea was poured and the waitress had withdrawn, Clarice looked across at Dale. "I've always thought myself a fairly self-reliant person," she said, "but then I've never had responsibilities like these before;—to look after my own problems was about all I had to do."

"All the family come to you now?"

"Yes," she nodded. "And so I, Clement, come to you."

"You don't think I've deserted you, Clarice? For I haven't, you know."

A slight smile was his reward. "I can't blame any one for keeping away from Hillcrest; but I know that you haven't abandoned poor Uncle Melchior. He thinks every one must hate him."

Dale took up his teaspoon. "Does he connect these things that have happened with his coming back here to live?"

"I think that he does sometimes, though we all tell him that we don't see how that can be. I think that

at times he almost decides to go back to Italy; but Mr. Tyrrel urges him not to do that. He points out that to go away now would seem like shirking a duty."

Dale glanced at the girl, who was looking down at her cup. "What do you think yourself?" he asked gently.

"I'm afraid he'd never be happy if he went away. I wouldn't be in his place. It would seem like deserting the family."

"You'd stand by the ship, Clarice?"

"Yes, I'd stick to it. Even if the ship was as queer as our family. It's a strange thing, Clement; I've known my relatives all my life, and liked them; but since Uncle Mel came home it's seemed as if each one of us was showing his worst side."

"You haven't."

"Yes, I have,—forgive me for contradicting. I see all the less pleasant traits;—I suppose we all have less pleasant traits hidden somewhere about us; and I look for them and think about them until they're magnified. Ugh! It's like turning a microscope on everybody within reach."

"Don't turn it on me, please," Dale begged, smiling. "I've all sorts of less pleasant traits tucked away in my pockets."

"On you?" The clear eyes twinkled for a moment as she regarded him. "You're immune, thank for-

tune! That's one reason I asked you to meet me here. I wanted to look at one person who hasn't a single blemish."

"Thanks." Dale passed his cup for a second filling. "How about Mr. Tyrrel?"

Clarice poured the tea with care, put in sugar and a fresh slice of lemon, and handed him the cup. "Mr. Tyrrel is—just beginning to be trying. He's taking the whole family under his wing; nicely, of course; but a little like a duenna."

"Tyrrel like a duenna!" Dale gave a chuckle. "I can't picture that tall, dark fellow in any such feminine rôle." He sipped his tea, found it hot, put it down again. "And one of the family, at least, doesn't like being taken under Tyrrel's wing?"

"She does not!" Clarice gave a provoked smile. "There, you see, it's exactly as I was saying. The worst side,—each one of us rubbing the others the wrong way."

"Clarice, you ought to leave Hillcrest, and go back to your own apartment."

"Not at present. Uncle Melchior needs me."

"He has his friend Tyrrel, and he has the others."

Clarice glanced down the room to another table, where a tea-party of four were putting on coats and furs and laughing at some joke. Dale saw a shadow creep across her face, and his fingers itched to steal

over and touch hers, lying there passive, upturned on the white cloth.

“Mr. Tyrrel, of course, he has,” she said, still looking away. “But I don’t know about the others. I don’t know whether Marian will ever go to Hillcrest again. And her husband is in such trouble. . . . No, I side with Marian; I don’t think that Amory has ever been very decent to her, and Marian is the type of woman who must be cared for by some one, and if not by her husband, then by some other man. . . . But I am sorry for him. . . . He thinks every one despises him now. No, I don’t believe that Amory can be much comfort to my uncle.”

“I agree with you there.”

“And Pip Kelley — . . . I don’t know why, but he slinks around like a creature that’s lost its backbone. He seems to think that he’s more unfortunate than any one else. He’s always wanting sympathy, and never appears to think that he might give some to the rest. He doesn’t help much. And neither do the Founts. It’s like a gap widening between my uncle and the others. They look at each other as if they—why, almost as if they hated every one.”

“Yes, Clarice, I see. You are Mr. Pryde’s one real prop.”

“Mr. Tyrrel and I.” She gave a frown. “What a strange household! And, Clement, how’s it going

to end? It seems almost as if there were a fatality over Hillcrest."

In the privacy of their alcove Dale pressed her hand, and for a moment their fingers intertwined. The soft color flooded her face. "You're a good friend," she murmured.

"We'll keep faith with your uncle."

She drew her hand gently away, and reached for her gloves in her lap. "He needs us. It isn't what the law can do for him,—not a matter of justice;—it's different now, very different; it's to restore his faith in human nature."

And after a short pause she continued:

"You see, if he believes that what happened to Wykoff and Nelson was in some way connected with him and his coming back to America, he would think there was something evil about him and about all the family, wouldn't he? Anyway, I think that is the impression he has—and the rest of them have that idea too. It seems to have fastened upon them, in varying degrees, of course. It's like a moral poison. Perhaps that's one way to explain what I meant when I said that I seem to be looking for the worst traits in all my relations. Maybe that accounts ——"

"No, no; I won't believe that thought has any real hold on you," Dale interrupted.

"Nevertheless it has, Clement." She looked away,

then back at him abruptly. "Will you go to see Marian Harper with me,—say, to-morrow afternoon?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"I would like you to. And now I must be going."

Dale paid the check, and they left the tea-shop. Outside the winter street was a confusion of automobiles, pedestrians, a babel of noises. Lights streaked the gloom and presented a world of hurry, wherein each human particle was consumed with a desire to reach its personal goal.

In the throng Dale offered his arm to his companion, but at the same moment a newsboy blocked their path with an evening paper and a loud recital of its headlines. Clarice took the paper and Dale dropped a couple of pennies into the boy's hand.

A street-lamp was over their heads. "What's this?" said Clarice, staring at the newspaper.

On the front page was the announcement that Amory Harper had been held for the Grand Jury on account of the Hillcrest crime.

XII

A NEW THEORY

THE next afternoon Dale went with Clarice to see Mrs. Harper. Marian lived in a small house on a most respectable street, a house in which her husband had lived with his mother before he married, and which was, in a sense, hallowed by the Harper tradition.

The maid admitted them to the small drawing-room, which was already lighted, for the afternoon was dark, by an orange-shaded lamp. She left with their cards, and Dale surveyed a couple of Harper portraits, rather large for the room, but impressively dignified. Then there was a rustle of skirts, and turning, he found their hostess standing between the curtains.

Marian wore a mauve gown, so simply made that it appeared almost girlish. It struck Dale that there was a simplicity about her,—the way she had done her hair, her pose, her long, slim hands at her sides,—that he had never noticed on their previous meetings. She made him think of a woman in a Greek tragedy. And this impression was increased by a quietness in a face

usually animated and by an intentness in the dark eyes that seemed to be feeling their way through some obscuring mist.

He thought how different she was from that Marian Harper who at Hillcrest had passionately defended Lombard from Antonio's accusation.

"I brought Mr. Dale," said Clarice, "because I wanted you to see some one from outside."

"You're very kind, dear." Marian settled into a chair at some distance from the lamp.

Clarice started to talk of various indifferent matters, but after a few moments Marian interrupted her. "You are very sweet and good, Clarice. But Mr. Dale is a friend, and will not misunderstand. I am trying to work something out." She looked about the room, as if collecting impressions; and then spoke quietly. "When I was a child and frightened at things in the dark I used to go and make myself see what they were. But since then I've gotten out of that habit. Now I'm trying to see facts as clearly as I can."

Again Dale had the impression of a Grecian woman, the dark eyes peering through mists.

"It was high time, was it not?" Marian continued. "When some one else had to pay the penalty for my not looking at facts. It's been like a web; something that entangled us all. My blindness added to Nelson's

blindness, and to Amory's. We were all groping about. I don't think that since I've been married I've ever once sat down and thought things out. . . . But I have this last week. And that's a beginning."

"Why, Marian ——" exclaimed Clarice.

"No; let me talk about it—about myself and the others. What is the old expression? . . . 'In cure of her soul.' . . . That's what I need, what I'm trying to do. . . . Clarice, Mr. Dale, I know that it wasn't Amory who killed Nelson."

The other two were silent while Marian's slender shoulders straightened, and she grew more animated.

"Amory couldn't have done it. I have lived with him in this house for ten years, and I know him. I should like Uncle Melchior to hear what I say, Clarice. He doesn't know Amory as I do. No one could unless they had lived in this house—in the Harpers' house. There's tradition, you see. And sometimes I've hated, sometimes I've respected it."

"I think I do understand," Clarice said slowly. "And I'll try to make Uncle Melchior see what you mean."

Marian's eyes traveled again over the portraits on the wall, the heavy, inherited furniture, until they came to a stop on the orange shade of the lamp. "Don't misunderstand me, please. Traditions aren't

always pleasant things to live with;—but traditions such as Amory's don't permit of some crimes."

Each of her hearers sensed the undercurrent that had run through the married life of this pleasure-loving woman.

"Amory and Nelson were so entirely different ——" Marian turned her eyes directly to Dale. "I don't suppose that you came here this afternoon to find out what I think; but I've told you. Mr. Harper wanted to win my uncle's good opinion; but we've all been trying to do that. Perhaps I ought to except Clarice;—yes, I do; I except Clarice altogether."

"I've talked with Mr. Harper," said Dale; "and my conclusion is the same as yours."

"Remember that I think we've all been guilty in varying degrees," Marian continued. "That's one of the things I've learned in this past week. No one of us does live to himself alone; and though I don't know how, I feel that we've each contributed in some way to the tragedy that happened."

A pause grew,—lengthened. The dark-eyed woman, her hands lying quietly in her lap, seemed to have delivered her message.

"You will come to see Uncle Melchior?" It was Clarice who spoke. "Not just now perhaps;—but after a little while?"

"I think we had all of us better leave him to you,"

said Marian. "I should do him no good." And after a moment she added: "I haven't got so far as to think of the future; but I know—yes, I know, it will be different."

Soon after the callers rose. They had come to bring her some assurance, some comfort; but instead, cloaking her own emotions, she had showed them the result of her recent thoughts.

Through the wintry street they walked some distance in silence.

"Do you see what I meant yesterday, Clement?" Clarice asked. "It can never be the same with Marian and her husband. They might have kept up their attempt to live together, if this hadn't happened. But now —— Oh, I don't know how it will work out; but it seems as if they must see each other entirely differently. Oh, most of us do need something to cover our real selves, don't we? Think—if we all showed our ugly traits!"

For a few moments Clarice watched the pale amber and dark purple of the sunset sky set in the narrow street-frame. "Some day Amory will come back to that little house and she will look at him through her new eyes and he will look at her in the same way. They will each be the same person the other knew before; but between them will be all this that has happened at Hillcrest. Whether what they did was in

any way responsible will not greatly matter. The fact will somehow be between them."

And after another short silence:

"Do you think, Clement, there may be some connection between those two and what happened to Nelson?"

"Yes, I think there may be."

"How could that be?"

Dale hesitated. "I don't know anything positive yet. I haven't a single thing that I could swear to; not a scrap of what any judge would consider as evidence. But there are threads that do lead somewhere; and it seems to me that one of them is the relation that existed between Nelson Lombard and the Harpers."

"Of course that couldn't be connected with what happened to Wykoff?"

Dale shook his head. "No, that's another thread. But suppose those two threads cross in some way, knot together?"

She looked at him for a moment. "I don't see how they could. There must be some reasonable explanation surely."

"Everything is reasonable when you understand it. But you can't always account for a crime on what you consider reasonable grounds until you get at all the motives that went to its making."

“That’s beyond me,” she said with a sigh and a frown. “I haven’t enough imagination.”

Dale let it go at that, preferring to change the trend of her thoughts. He went with her out on the train to their station, and walked with her through the dusk over the country road. They avoided talking of Marian and the others; for the time they simply took comfort in the new intimacy that had, under the stress of circumstances, come to them.

The gates of Hillcrest, the park, the distant pile of the house presently stood before them.

“You must go in, I suppose,” said Dale, reluctantly.

“Why, yes. My uncle will be waiting.”

“I wish ——” said Dale, and stopped.

“Yes?” she said. “I know what you wish—that I’d go back to my little apartment in town. But I can’t,—not yet, anyway. I’m going to stand by this household.”

Yet he hated to leave her at the front door, even though the lights of the old house sent a ruddy glow into the night.

Amory Harper engaged his own lawyer, a man older than Dale and of long experience in the criminal courts. The District Attorney was unable to make out a sufficiently strong case to convince the Grand Jury that Harper ought to be held for court, and he

was dismissed under surveillance. From what Dale could learn Harper had told substantially the same story he had related to Dale in the writing-room, and no amount of questioning could shake it. Dale was not much surprised; he had already relegated Harper to the position of an agent,—an innocent one, in all probability,—rather than a principal.

He was surprised, however, when several evenings later Ralph Miles appeared at Rockledge and asked if Dale would see him. In the seclusion of the lawyer's study the caller, standing by Dale's desk and leaning his large hands on a pile of books, demanded abruptly: "What have you made of all this?"

"My mind is still full of questions. I have no definite answers," was Dale's immediate reply.

"Very good. No one else is any better informed, it seems. But since we can't deal with facts, it's high time, in my opinion, that we dealt with theories."

"You have one?" Dale suggested.

Miles moved about the room between the door and the desk. His fingers jingled his key-ring in his pocket and his brows were bent. "My theory is that whoever or whatever it was—the force, in short,—that struck down Jay and Lombard was aiming at something else; that those two crimes were only part of a general plan. It sounds rather vague, I admit; but do you get my meaning?"

“ Oh yes,” said Dale. “ But in that case, what was this force, as you call it, actually aiming at? ”

“ At my uncle, Melchior Pryde.”

The lawyer stroked his cheek. “ Why shouldn’t it have dealt with him more directly? ”

“ I don’t think that would have suited its purpose.”

“ And its purpose was—or might be? ”

“ To frighten him; perhaps to wring something out of him finally.”

Dale mused over this, while Miles, stationary again, his hands in his trouser pockets, loomed large beside the desk.

“ What could such a force conceivably be? ” the lawyer asked at length.

“ Ah, now we’re coming to another leap in the dark. But the whole matter’s in the dark, so far, anyway. What do we know of my uncle’s history in Italy? His connections there? Italy is a country concerning which we hear many strange stories.”

“ Perhaps,—if we judge by newspapers and novels. You’re thinking of secret societies, tales of revenge and such things? ”

“ It’s only a theory, of course. But then, Dale, in addition to my uncle there’s Tyrrel; those two, as you know, are like blood-brothers. What affects one of them must affect the other almost equally.”

“ What do you know of Tyrrel—in Italy? ”

“As little as I know of my uncle. . . . Not quite so little, however. I’ve talked with Antonio Poppi, and he hinted at some story that involved Tyrrel with a woman, an Italian woman; and this woman was a member of a secret society.”

“Antonio told you that?” said Dale in surprise.

Miles grinned. “It doesn’t seem quite in keeping with that fellow to blab, you mean? Well, I found ways of urging him to talk—in the wine-cellar.”

“He was drunk?”

“No. I suspect it would take all of Fount’s liquor to make Poppi actually chatty. But he was surprised, and a little startled. I came on him unawares. Whatever it was he was doing, he didn’t want me to catch him. So I backed him into a corner, figuratively speaking; and he gave me a few ideas.”

“You don’t know what it was he was doing?”

“Messing about with some bottles; smelling them, I think. But I gathered that our good friend Tyrrel had some sort of a past; not a very black one, most likely; but enough to give somebody a hold on him. And that hold on him might include Uncle Mel.”

Dale sat, chin on hand, watching Miles’ face, clear in the lamplight. “I am interested in those three, Mr. Pryde and Tyrrel and Antonio Poppi, in Italy,” he said thoughtfully. “I have had some theories concerning them too. But I hadn’t got so far as a secret society.

So Antonio contributed that?—The woman and her hold on Tyrrel? ”

Miles swung his leg over the corner of the desk and sat down. “What does she want? What does this woman want? What does the force—as I’ve called it—want to accomplish? Why, to get Uncle Mel and Tyrrel back again. To use them, to use my uncle’s money. And the way they would do that would be to drive my uncle away from here.”

“Possibly; though the theory seems a little far-fetched; even admitting that any such society could find agents, criminal agents, to work their will over here. And I know that when Mr. Pryde was thinking of returning to Fiesole recently, Tyrrel urged him to stay at Hillcrest.”

“Oh, I don’t say that Tyrrel’s a quitter, or my uncle either. I think that Tyrrel is a man of nerve. He’d fight, if he saw his opponent. But this kind of thing—in the dark—does get a man’s courage. I tell you, Dale, I feel it myself.”

Miles, now occupying the front of the desk like a huge gargoyle perched on a cornice, shook his head sombrely. “Something has taken possession of Hillcrest,—and, though it is a fairly old house, any casual visitor would say it was as naturally cheerful and sunshiny and generally comfortable a dwelling as could be found,—and filled it with fear. I’m not thinking only

of Jay and Lombard; I'm thinking of how it's affecting each and every one of us, who comes and goes in the house. We're ready to fly off the handle at the sound of a footstep behind us. And we don't trust one another. There's Kelley, for example. You ought to see the way he looks at me."

"Kelley should go away for a while. He's worrying over his painting."

"His painting! If he'd only stick to worrying about that!" Miles seemed on the point of unbosoming himself further, but checked the impulse. "You're quite right; he ought to go away. And so ought all of us, Mr. Pryde included. And that brings us back to my first point. Isn't it the object of all this devilish business to force my uncle to go?"

"Then who, supposing your theory might be right, do you think stabbed Lombard?" And seeing that Miles had no answer to make, Dale went on. "There must have been a human hand involved, of course. Even the power of a secret society has to depend on its human agents. Do you think the criminal, or criminals, came into the house from outside? The police have been busy, you know. And it seems to me that if that is your conclusion, you're attributing an extraordinary degree of skill to these assassins."

Miles slipped down from his perch. "I'm telling you the effect of all this dastardly business, not its

cause. If you were to spend a few days in the house, I think you'd grasp what I mean. I don't expect the police will ever solve it. It's not what you might call in their line."

"I do grasp it," said Dale, thinking of his recent talks with Clarice. "And I don't mind telling you that to a certain extent what you've said runs in the same direction with conjectures of my own. I didn't know anything of the matter involving Tyrrel that Antonio hinted to you. But I've wondered if there might be something in Italy that would help us to understand what has happened here."

Miles gave a sigh. "Well, it's some comfort to have told you that, anyhow. I can't talk about it to my uncle, or to any one else at the house. They'd probably think I was crazy. But you're detached, you can look at it from all angles, even the most unlikely. In a way, too, it's like putting a record in a safe deposit box. No matter what happens to those directly concerned, the document's there to help the outsiders. In case it should come to the fall of the House of Pryde"—he gave a smile—"you'd have certain guides in your search among the ruins."

And after Dale had seen Miles to the door and returned to his own den those words—"the fall of the House of Pryde"—echoed in his ears. It seemed as if he was seeing a family disintegrate under his eyes,

bit by bit the members drop asunder, until there would be left—what? Perhaps only Melchior, too fearful to stay, who would fly to his refuge in a foreign land, there to forget, if he could, what his home-coming had brought to his own flesh and blood.

That foreign land. Was there anything in what Miles had told him of Tyrrel in Italy, in what Antonio had hinted? Why had Antonio spoken? To divert attention when he had been caught in the wine-cellar, nosing among the bottles? To throw Miles off the track of something else? What had there been in Italy? What secret was there shared among those three? Or what between two? Or what known only to one? And if so, to which one?

This started a train in Dale's mind that led to the researches he had made in the library, the notes of which were in the drawer of his desk. He took them out. But his study of them was mere conjecture. He could put his finger on nothing. He was like a squirrel in a cage that goes round and round, with no support to hold his weight. As Miles had said, it was the effect of this dastardly business he saw, and not the causes that produced it. And the effect was—the fall of the House of Pryde.

He swept the papers into the drawer. The House of Pryde to Dale meant Clarice. She was at the centre of it, not the hard-driven Melchior. And he could

neither pluck her from it, nor prevent it from falling and catching her in the ruins. He could only stand by.

He thought of her as the girl he had known in those other days when they were merely good friends. She had been a jolly companion. He recalled how eagerly she had told him that the uncle she had not seen since she was a tiny child was coming home again to live among them. She had hoped he would find them likeable after all these years. And now —

No, that picture of Clarice was gone. In its place was a woman. The laughter came less lightly, the clear eyes more rarely danced. She was a brave spirit, but troubled. Where would be the end?

Dale sat there, recalling each trick of her head and hands, the way her fair hair curled away from her forehead, the upward slant of her brows. And how did she feel toward him? Were they coming closer together? Or did she think of him only as her old friend, her new adviser?

And meantime she was at Hillcrest. He had a mad impulse to rush over there and seize her in his arms and make her forget her uncle. But it could not be done. Her uncle was her first thought. Until Dale—or some one else—could clean up that Augean stable, he must wait for his chance at Clarice.

The trap-door in the library closet at Hillcrest—the strange condition of Jay and Lombard when they had

talked with Fount and Harper on those two fateful evenings—Antonio nosing among the bottles—they all meant anything or nothing. Had he a single real clue to work upon? The police?—If they failed, what could he expect to discover? Ultimately Dale, with a weary shake of his head, went to bed.

Next morning Clarice telephoned him at his office. “Hamilton Fount has disappeared,” she said. “Day before yesterday he didn’t come home to dinner, nor for the night; and yesterday he wasn’t at the bank. No one knows anything about him.”

She said more, but that was the gist of her message.

Dale hung up the receiver slowly. What did this mean? Why, that another stone of the house had dropped from its place.

XIII

THE HOUSE DIVIDED

CLARICE, in a dark russet gown, her only ornament a carnelian pendant,—a gift which her uncle had bought at one of the shops on Florence's Ponte Vecchio,—sat, chin on hand, and slippered foot on the fender, gazing into the fire. Outside the snow was falling evenly, gently, as if to obliterate every ugly black mark on earth. Near Clarice Dale was holding his fingers, numb from his recent ride, out toward the warming blaze. The small writing-room at Hillcrest was only illuminated by the ruddy glow from the hearth.

“He seems to have left everything at the bank in order.” The voice was that of Clarice, ruminative, gentle. “Naturally that was one of the first questions; but the president of the bank assured Josephine that all was correct. He said that Hamilton left no word that he was going away; and so far as we can find out Hamilton took nothing from his room here when he went in town on Monday,—no bag of any kind, such as a person would take if he were planning a trip.”

“And his wife has no suggestions?”

“Poor Josephine! She doesn’t know what to think. And she doesn’t know what to do. You can’t advertise for information concerning a grown man who’s disappeared, as you might for a lost child.”

“You can. But it mightn’t be wise.”

“Not for a man who’s a banker; and especially not for one who’s been living in *this* house.” Clarice cast a sidelong glance at Dale. “Does it mean anything to you, this disappearance of Hamilton?”

“If he has disappeared,—and I can’t suppose that any one has kidnapped him,—it means to me that he was either unbalanced or that he was afraid of something.”

“That’s how it seems to me.” Clarice withdrew her foot from the fender and smoothed her skirt over her knees. “That’s how it seems to Uncle Melchior too; he told me so to-day. He said that he didn’t wonder that Hamilton had disappeared; he intimated that he’d like to do the same thing himself. But he’s terribly sorry.”

Dale looked through the curtained window at the snow, which, falling so thickly and persistently, seemed to cut off Hillcrest from all the rest of the world. There was something about the house that vaguely disturbed him. He wondered whether he, like the inhabitants, was losing his power of common-sense opinion in regard to the place and the people.

“What could he have been afraid of?” Clarice’s reflective voice brought him back to the subject of Fount. “Surely he couldn’t have had anything on his conscience that would have made him run away?”

“I don’t know,” Dale answered. “And yet Mr. Pryde seemed to understand why he disappeared. And, Clarice, I almost do myself.”

“Clement.” Her hand touched the arm of his chair. “What is wrong with us all here? These evasions—these suspicions——”

“That’s it, evasions—suspicions.” He laid his hand on hers. “Oh, Clarice, why can’t you come away? I don’t want you to stay here.”

He was interrupted by a step at the door. Mrs. Fount came into the room. She had none of her usual self-assertive manner. She motioned Dale not to stand up, but did not sit down herself.

“You didn’t hear any news of my husband in the city?” she asked.

Dale shook his head.

“I can’t understand it,” said Mrs. Fount. “He was the most methodical man in the world. He always let me know when he had an engagement that would keep him away. He was very particular about that.”

“It’s only been since the day before yesterday,” said Dale, seeking to reassure her.

Mrs. Fount moved across the room, looked out at the snow. The dropping of embers from the logs, the tick of the clock, were the only sounds.

"I wish we'd never come to this house," said the woman at the window. "It'll be the ruin of us all."

"Please don't say that to Uncle Melchior," murmured Clarice.

"Why not? Doesn't he know it? He found us all here, at peace and happy, when he came this autumn; and now—now —— See what has happened to us?"

The silence stretched out until Clarice broke it with a whisper. "It's not his fault, you know."

Mrs. Fount moved back. "I think I shall go away. Our uncle has Mr. Tyrrel and Antonio. And you, I suppose, Clarice. I suppose you will stay."

Dale stirred in his chair. "That will make it rather hard for Miss Pryde, I think."

Before Mrs. Fount made answer Tyrrel came into the room. "I thought I heard voices," he said. "Is Miss Clarice pouring tea?"

"No tea," said Clarice. "But do come and sit by the fire."

The tall man stood on the opposite side of the hearth from Mrs. Fount, his hands behind his back. Dale had an irritable wish that he would put his hands out, warm them, do something with them.

"Mrs. Fount thinks she must go back to her own

house," Clarice explained. "I hope she will, if she wants to."

"I don't blame her," said Tyrrel. "I would give a great deal myself for the warm Italian sun I'm used to instead of these cold dark days."

There the conversation lapsed for a few minutes, while Dale had the curious sensation that the man and woman on either side of the mantelpiece and all the other people in the house were figures conjured up by his imagination. He turned his head toward Clarice. No, she was real, as real as he was himself. But then she belonged to the world he had known before he first came to Hillcrest.

"There are dark days, and dark corners in Italy also, I fancy," Dale said after a pause.

Tyrrel swayed from side to side on his long legs, while Dale wished the man would stand still, or sit down, where his face would be more in the firelight.

"Yes, of course there are," Tyrrel conceded impatiently. "But I've never felt such a chill, such a blight, both physical and mental, as I've experienced here."

"There's been sufficient reason for that," said Dale.

"Mr. Fount felt it," said Josephine in her colorless voice.

"It's not what I expected to find in America," Tyrrel declared.

"You may meet human passion and crime anywhere," Dale retorted.

"Oh, don't—please don't!" Clarice half rose from her chair. "Please don't argue about it." And then, half-apologetically: "It gets on my nerves. And on Josephine's too; I know it must."

"I'm not enjoying it," said Tyrrel. "Strange as it may seem, I don't find it pleasant here."

Dale's irritation increased; he felt annoyed with both Tyrrel and Mrs. Fount. Why did they continue to stand and brood there, like two tall caryatids, supporting the mantelpiece?

If they wouldn't go, he would; so he rose. "Mr. Pryde is in the library?" he said, looking at Clarice. "I'd like a few words with him."

In a sense it was a desertion, he reflected, as he went out into the hall. He was leaving Clarice to those two, whom, for the moment, he himself found unendurable. He knew now what she had meant when she had told him she was seeing the worst sides, and only the worst sides, of every one at Hillcrest. If Mrs. Fount intended to leave, why didn't she go? If Tyrrel felt a chill, a blight, in America, why the devil couldn't he take himself off to his beloved Italy?

The house seemed cheerless and cold. At the turn in the stairs he stopped a moment to look out through a window at the steadily falling snow. Already the

garden was a white world of humps and hollows, streaked with black shadows from the gaunt limbs of trees. He went on up to the library, where Mr. Pryde, a lighted lamp at his elbow, was reading, or pretending to read, a heavy, calf-bound book.

Pryde looked up, and took off his reading glasses.

"Good-evening, Dale. Have you brought any news to lighten 'the winter of my discontent'?" He tapped the volume. "I've been dipping into Shakespeare."

"I've heard nothing of Mr. Fount."

Pryde clasped his hands on the book. "No;—and I don't expect we shall hear anything. I am simply waiting."

"Waiting? For what?"

"What does man wait for? The next turn of the wheel." There was a shrug of the shoulders in the black velvet coat. "Ah, yes; I suppose that is an old man's viewpoint. You don't look at it in that way, do you? Well, the attempt to manage fate belongs to young people, like my niece Clarice and you."

Dale had never seen Melchior Pryde in a mood like this. He sat down, looking with interest at the wrinkled face, at the blue eyes that had retained their clearness and that reminded him of the eyes of Clarice.

"The world is what I might call a house of delu-

sion," said Pryde. "We enter its various rooms expecting to find certain things, and we find each one is different from what we expected. Take my own case, for example. I expected to find peace and security over here; and instead I have found precisely the reverse. I should have stayed at Fiesole with Ambrose Tyrrel and Antonio."

"Mr. Pryde, was there nothing that happened in Italy that seems to have any relation to the things that have taken place here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Please think," urged Dale.

Pryde obeyed. "We lived a very simple life," he said slowly. "I had my books and flowers, and I saw a good deal of many interesting people, some of them expatriates like myself and Ambrose. He enjoyed the same things I did, though he had a number of friends that I saw little of; mostly Italians, they were; and several of them of old, noble families. He was a great student, he was always looking up legends and the histories of some of those families. Very interesting they are too, Dale. You should get him to tell you some of them."

"I suppose they are," said Dale; though at the moment he felt no inclination for discussing folk-lore with Tyrrel.

"And Antonio was,—as I always maintain,—the

perfect servant. He had a hobby for natural science, —but I believe I've told you about that."

Dale nodded, then said with a smile, "That's a better hobby than some of those that people over here attribute occasionally to Italians. They think them mainly interested in secret societies, strange feuds and such things."

"Ridiculous, my dear fellow!" stated Pryde. "As well imagine red Indians and scalpings, and such things, when you think of Americans."

"Of course that's not my own opinion of Italians," said Dale, "but I know there are people who think along those lines."

Pryde sat back, dejected. "Well, who am I to blame them?" he murmured. "The things that have happened in my house must seem sufficiently evil to every one."

While he was still moodily staring and shaking his head, Miles came in, his cheeks red from the cold. He nodded to Dale, and laid his hand affectionately on Pryde's shoulder. "I came out to cheer you up, Uncle Mel," he said. "I'll stay to dinner, and afterwards we'll have a game of chess."

Dale noticed how eagerly the older man looked up into the strong, rugged countenance of his nephew. Pryde straightened up and smiled.

"That's right, Ralph, that's right. You won't run

away from me, will you? You won't take French leave?"

"You're thinking of Hamilton, are you? No, sir; I've got nothing to run away from."

Pryde glanced appealingly at his big nephew. "Oh, be fair to him, Ralph. Hamilton is a good man."

"So is every one in your eyes," Miles replied. "You ought to have some one to point out blemishes to you. But Dale, here—he's a lawyer—perhaps he's been doing that?"

There was a hint of suspicion in Miles' glance, and Dale found himself quick to resent the suggestion. "Implying motives is not in my line," he said. "I don't tell everything that I may happen to think."

"I'm glad to hear it. I wish every one was like you. Has Pip been out to see you to-day?" Miles added, turning to his uncle.

"He came to lunch." Pryde rubbed his hands up and down over the chair arms. "Ralph, I wish you and he were a little more kindly disposed toward each other."

"He's been telling tales, has he? That's what you seem to imply."

"No, he has not been telling tales," Pryde said positively. "But he's disturbed about something. I've been wondering if he needs a little money."

"Every one needs money." The sarcastic words

were followed by a short laugh. "Don't give it to him, sir. He'd only throw it away in riotous living,—entertaining petticoats."

"Now, Ralph, now ——" Pryde glanced uneasily at Dale.

"Oh, Dale knows what artists are. I dare say Pip has been to him already with his tale of entanglements."

Again there was suspicion in Miles' look, and Dale, taking offense, promptly stood up.

"I agree with Mr. Pryde that family matters had better not be discussed before third persons. And if any one comes to me for professional advice, I certainly don't talk about it."

"Oh, come now, Dale, don't get angry," Miles said banteringly.

"I'm not angry, not in the least."

But he was angry, nevertheless. And he was also wondering whether Miles was deliberately trying to provoke him; and if so, for what purpose.

"Ralph, Mr. Dale is right," Pryde said, in an attempt at peace. He turned to the lawyer. "You must overlook these—these little disagreements. I suppose all families have them sometimes; the situation here has been trying to all of us. You must judge us lightly, Dale. Peter Kelley is a decent fellow; and so is Miles, of course."

"That's so," said Miles. "Of course we're all decent. And Hamilton, too; and Amory Harper."

Dale turned from the big man, disgusted at his manner.

"You must take it for granted that I agree with you, Mr. Pryde," he said. "Good-evening, sir."

On the staircase, however, Pryde overtook him. "Ralph has a rough edge to his tongue," he murmured; "but he's all right; a good fellow at bottom. You see how it is, though, Dale, don't you? Do you think I should go away?"

"I'd stay and teach them their manners, sir!" Dale didn't care who might hear him; he rather hoped that Miles would. Between them all, it seemed to him, they were making their uncle's position more and more uncomfortable.

"Yes, that's what I think myself," said Pryde, in a positive tone that rather surprised Dale. "But they are all honest at bottom, you know. Every last one of them is, Harper and Fount and the others. I know them. I've watched them. When I first came home I took them all at face value; but since then I've studied them. They've got their weak points; but so has every one. And some day—some day, there'll come an understanding."

The two had reached the hall. Pryde held out his

hand. "Good-night. And remember—the quality of mercy ——"

Dale looked into those kind, clear eyes. "I try never to judge any one with prejudice, sir," he said, and pressed Pryde's hand hard.

He had intended to leave without seeing any one else; but as he went to the front door Clarice slipped up beside him.

"You felt the tension, Clement?" she whispered. "Yes, I know that you did. I could tell by the way you spoke to Josephine and Mr. Tyrrel. Oh, if they'd all only go away, and leave me alone with Uncle and Mr. Tyrrel! I think I could manage them."

"Miles and Kelley are at loggerheads now," said Dale. "I don't understand Miles. But I think he'll bear watching."

"We'll all bear watching if this tension goes on. Ralph is the only one of us all that amuses Uncle Melchior."

"There's always a sting to his words."

"Oh, Clement, don't you get to faultfinding!" She smiled as she added, "Really Ralph isn't so bad."

"It's all a matter of degree, isn't it?" Dale retorted lightly. "But I must start home or I'll get stalled in the snow-drifts."

As he drove through the park to the highroad Dale found himself wishing that he had been a little more

explicit to Clarice when he had spoken of Miles. Miles might cause trouble, though of what sort was not now clear. Dale felt that he should have cautioned Clarice to keep an eye on Miles, especially in his bearing toward Kelley.

XIV

THWARTED BY CLARICE

THAT neglect to warn Clarice was in Dale's thoughts all next day; a dozen times he was on the point of telephoning her; but how difficult to caution her against some act of her own cousin! How more than difficult when Dale himself had no clear idea as to what sort of action it was that he feared.

And after all, he reflected, it was not Miles he feared so much as the influence of the house itself. The house had taken on a positive uncanniness. Dale woke up at night to wonder what was going on over at Hillcrest; and if he, an outsider, felt that way about it, what must be the sensations of those who lived under its roof?

Then, the second night after his call at Hillcrest, Tyrrel telephoned to ask if he would come and give them his advice. Tyrrel did not go into details, and Dale, wondering what new turn affairs were taking in Pryde's household, drove over in his car.

Bramwell, still faithful, answered the ring at the front door.

"There's nothing the matter, I hope?" asked Dale. "Mr. Tyrrel wanted my advice."

"I don't know what it is exactly, sir," said Bramwell. "We're all suspicious now. You'll find the family in the library."

The butler took his cap and coat and Dale hastened up the stairs. In the library—ominous room in the recent history of Hillcrest!—he found himself awaited.

"Ah, here's Mr. Dale now," said Tyrrel. "Come in, come in."

Clarice, rising quickly, came over to Dale at the door.

Pryde sat in the chair by the table. On the divan Miles reclined, his legs up on the cushions. Kelley, seated, was staring at an empty glass he gripped in his fingers.

Relief was Dale's first sensation. Clarice was safe; and so also, it appeared, were the others.

"Yes, I'm here, at your service," he said, and walked toward the fireplace.

Then he met the eyes of Miles, staring at him from the divan, and his sense of bafflement returned. Why didn't somebody speak? Why did they all sit gazing at him, like a group of ghosts?

"Is there something wrong?" he demanded. "Mr. Tyrrel's message was urgent."

It was Miles who answered. He sat up, propping

his arm on a cushion. "We don't know, Dale. That's the truth of it, we don't know. But something has certainly happened."

"We wanted you to hear it, at first hand, while the facts are fresh," said Pryde.

Suddenly Kelley jumped up, as if he could stand inaction not a moment longer. He went over to Dale, the empty glass still in his hand. "Ralph and I had a quarrel to-night," he said quickly. "But look at Ralph and look at me:—Do you think it's possible that I could do him any harm,—any physical harm, I mean?"

Dale took the glass from Kelley's fingers and set it on the mantel. He judged it had held whiskey, given to Kelley as a bracer.

"No, I don't think you could hurt Miles very much," he said easily, "if he was on his guard. Has somebody hurt him?"

Kelley did not answer, and neither did any one else. Miles rubbed his forehead in a dazed way.

"Well," said Dale, beginning to be exasperated, "you can't expect me to guess what has happened."

"Of course we can't." Clarice, now standing by the table, turned and looked at her friend. "Pip and Ralph came to dinner this evening; there were only Uncle Melchior, Mr. Tyrrel and me;—Mrs. Fount has left. Some time after dinner Pip and Ralph came up

here and—and, well, they quarreled, just as Pip has said. They got—rather angry with each other, and almost came to blows.”

“Ralph tried to slap me, and I struck back,” Kelley explained.

“And then Ralph slipped and fell,” Clarice continued. “Luckily he fell on the rug, but it knocked the breath out of him.”

“Stunned him,” said Kelley. “I thought for a moment I’d killed him!”

In the silence that followed Dale looked closely at Miles. “You seem to be all right now,” he said.

“I am, barring a little giddiness. But I certainly came a cropper. I don’t understand it at all.”

“I was scared,” Kelley confessed, and his face and voice corroborated his words. “He was lying there, still as he could be. I tried to get him up, but he was too heavy. So I ran out into the hall, and there I saw Clarice coming up the stairs.”

“And you came back into this room with her at once?” Dale’s tone was sharp and excited.

“Yes, I did. I wanted to go down-stairs and get the men to come up. I didn’t think Clarice and I could do anything. But she wouldn’t stop. She caught me by the arm and insisted that we go back.”

Dale gave a glance at Clarice, an approving nod that was met by a flicker of eyelash.

“We came in here,” Kelley went on, “and between us we managed to lift Ralph on to the divan. He was still perfectly limp. We worked over him, rubbing his hands, loosening his collar,—but it didn’t seem to do any good. Then Clarice told me to go into the hall and call to the others. I did; and they came up, Uncle Melchior and Mr. Tyrrel; and a few minutes after them Bramwell and Antonio.”

“And Miss Pryde stayed in here with Miles while you went out?” Dale asked.

“Yes,” said Clarice. “But the door to the hall was wide open. I could see Pip all the time.”

Dale gave a grunt of relief. “Well, the others came up ——”

Kelley nodded. “Yes, and Bramwell fetched some whiskey, and we poured some down Ralph’s throat; and presently, after some fifteen minutes or more, he began to come to. . . . And now he seems all right again.”

“It’s devilish queer,” muttered Miles. “I never did anything like that in my life before. I always thought I was strong as an ox.”

“I imagine you are,” said Dale briefly. “But sometimes when a man gets into a towering passion his nerves give way on him.”

Miles frowned. “My nerves are steady enough.

And even so—even if they did go back on me—why should I act like that?”

“You were in a towering passion?” Dale continued, his words a statement of fact rather than a question.

The other man's face grew red, ashamed. “Why, to tell you the truth, I was. I was mad all over; I wanted to start a fight.” Again he looked confused, and rubbed his hand over his forehead. “But I don't understand why. Pip hadn't been insulting me.”

Kelley looked at Dale. “We'd been discussing that matter I told you about. Things had got to a point where I felt that I must have an understanding with Ralph. I asked him to come up here after dinner.”

“You asked him in the dining-room?”

“Yes, as we were leaving the table.”

Dale nodded. “I don't think it's necessary to go into the subject of your talk,—I can understand well enough how it might have led to angry words.” He looked at the five people in the room. “Well, it seems to me we're to be congratulated that Miss Pryde showed such presence of mind.”

“I didn't do anything,” said Clarice. “I only came in here and waited for the others.”

“And as a result Miles is all right,” Dale stated. “That's the main thing, after all.”

But in spite of this obvious truth, none of the five smiled or even nodded. They all seemed preoccupied.

"Mr. Dale," spoke up Pryde after a moment, "I was telling them, just before you came, that I think I'll lock up this room and forbid any one to come in."

"Why, Mr. Pryde?"

"Certainly you see some coincidence between what has happened here to-night and what has happened here before."

"But, Mr. Pryde, this misadventure of Miles may be explained on simple grounds. He was tremendously angry, he may have been drinking——" Miles started to speak, but Dale brushed him aside. "Anyway he came to no harm."

"But he might have," Pryde said heavily. "In the other cases the tragedies happened after quarrels."

"You must admit, Mr. Dale,"—it was Tyrrel who was speaking—"there is reason in what Mr. Pryde says. By a fortunate circumstance no harm came to Miles; but can we rest easy with that?"

"What's in your mind, Mr. Tyrrel?"

"The same thing that's in the minds of all of us,—yes, yourself included. There's some danger lurking here, something waiting for just such a chance as took place this evening."

"Aren't you making a mountain out of a mole-hill?" Dale parried. "I can't see this thing in the sinister light you give it."

"Neither can I," put in Miles. "Of course, it was deucedly unpleasant; but I can't believe that any harm threatened me really." He got up from the divan and held out his hand to Kelley. "I forgive you, old boy. This'll be a lesson to us both to keep a curb on our tongues. Really I don't blame you. I have a recollection that I said some pretty nasty things."

"I ought to have seen," said Kelley, now completely contrite, "that you weren't quite yourself. I did have a feeling that you weren't; but—but, when you started to slap me—I ——"

"Oh, forget it, Pip. Come along with me downstairs. All I need is to douse my head in cold water, and I'll be as fit as a king."

In a more friendly spirit than the two had shown for a long time, Miles and Kelley left the room.

"Well," said Pryde, his eyes seeking those of the lawyer, "this doesn't make me feel any easier about it."

"I'm sorry, sir," answered Dale. "But, as I said before, I think you're exaggerating the situation. However, if you feel as you say, lock up this room for a while. Its associations aren't pleasant. Use the rest of the house."

"No, the associations certainly are not pleasant," Pryde agreed. "Possibly they do make me unduly sensitive. Ambrose, let me take your arm. . . ."

No, I shan't go to bed yet. I think I will have Antonio make me a cup of coffee."

On the arm of his friend, the owner of Hillcrest, his shoulders bent, went out of the library. Their footsteps as they crossed the hall were audible; audible as they descended the stairs.

Dale was alone with Clarice. She looked at him.

"Is it really exaggeration, Clement?" she murmured.

"Surely you agree with me, Clarice," he said lightly.

The steps were no longer heard, the upper part of the house was silent.

Dale went to the hall door and shut it. He turned around.

"What do you know about this, Clarice?" he asked quickly.

"No more than what I've told you."

"How did you happen to be coming up-stairs when Kelley came out of this room?"

"I don't know;—I felt uneasy. I heard Pip ask Ralph to come here and I knew there was some trouble between them."

"I believe you saved Ralph's life by staying with him. When you came in didn't you notice anything?"

She shook her head. "I only saw Ralph on the rug. The room looked as it does now."

Dale glanced at the closet door. It was closed, and the heavy globe, as usual, stood before it.

“Who was down-stairs when you came up?”

“My uncle and Mr. Tyrrel. I don’t know about the servants. I’d been playing the piano for a while.”

“It was a narrow escape for Miles,” muttered Dale.

“Yes, there is danger here, danger every minute.”

Their eyes met again, held each other. “Oh, Clement, what is it?” The words were almost a moan.

“I don’t know what it is; but I feel perfectly certain that you were right—that all five of you were right—when you felt that there was more to this accident of Miles’ than appeared on the surface. I could feel it when I came into the room, before I’d heard a word. You all looked as if you were under some spell. What was it Mr. Tyrrel said?—‘There’s some danger lurking here, something waiting for just such a chance as took place this evening.’”

“I wasn’t afraid of Pip,—of anything he might do,” said Clarice.

“No. We’re not afraid of any one we know. If we were, defense would be easy. There isn’t any new person in the house, is there? Any new servant?”

“No. As a matter of fact, most of the servants have left. There’s still Bramwell and Antonio and the cook and one of the maids. Mrs. Shanklin went last week, and I’m doing her work. The gardener was

sick and sent word that he wouldn't be coming back. The chauffeur took another position, in town; he said he didn't like the country."

"I wish Antonio had left."

"You'll never be able to separate him from my uncle. Besides, Clement, I've never caught Antonio in anything underhand."

"Maybe not." Dale stood, reflective, for several minutes. "Well, Clarice, there it is. The danger's here, every minute; and until we know what it is, I don't trust anybody."

"Yes," she assented; and added, "What shall we do?"

"First, you must be protected. I mean to see to that. I don't trust your protection to your uncle or Tyrrel or Miles or Kelley or any one else."

"Why, Clement, I'm safe ——"

"Safe! Not as I see it." He shook his head. "Clarice, you must let me have my own way. This is no time for half-measures."

Under his intent gaze the color rose in her face. But she did not look away, her eyes acquiesced in his statement of mastery.

"Very well. I trust you."

He checked an impulse to go toward her. Instead he became brusque.

"You will go down to the drawing-room and stay

there until I come to you. I have several things to do."

Obediently she walked to the hall door. "You're coming down with me?"

"No. I want to be alone here."

"You'll take care, Clement?"

"I'll have eyes in the back of my head," he assured her. "Yes, please leave the door open."

But when she had gone, he felt no fear for himself. A tragedy had been averted that night; another would not be attempted so quickly on the heels of the other. Moreover it appeared that the danger, whatever it was, struck at victims already unconscious.

Again Dale surveyed the room, so large and well-lighted, so comfortable and attractive. He opened the door on the other side of the fireplace and looked out into the passage. There was nothing there; of course there would be nothing there.

He pushed the big globe on its rolling stand away from the door to the closet and opened that door. The light from the library showed him everything in its place, the boxes, the step-ladder, the curtained trap-door bolted into its frame. He made the circuit of the room, regarded the fastenings of the windows; not expecting to find anything that should give him information, but thinking hard on his problem.

Presently he switched off the lights and went down-

stairs. Not by the front way, however, but by the servants' stairs. Very quietly he stepped into the housekeeper's room. Antonio was there. He was sitting by a red cloth-covered table on which was a bottle and a glass.

"Well, Antonio," said Dale, "have you cleaned the brandy glasses?"

Poppi looked surprised, but instantly stood up. "Yes, sir. I always wash them. Mr. Pryde likes me to do it."

"The gentlemen had their brandy after dinner to-night?"

Poppi agreed with a bow.

"And what was in Mr. Miles' glass?"

The servant stared at Dale. "Why, sir, I'm sure I don't know. The same that was in the other glasses, I fancy."

"You know it wasn't. Don't you?"

But instead of admitting that knowledge, Antonio shook his head. "I'm sure that it must have been the same, Mr. Dale." He turned to the table. "There's the very bottle I poured from for all the gentlemen. Four glasses. And I've just had a glass myself."

"Why did you do that?"

"Well, sir,—if I must admit it,—just to make sure that the brandy was all right. Will you try a glass, Mr. Dale?"

“No, thank you. Go on with your studies.”

Dale turned on his heel. He felt that he had learned something important about Pryde's servant, and incidentally about the glass of brandy that had been given to Miles.

XV

THE BRANDY GLASSES

IN the billiard-room Dale discovered Miles, trying to erase his earlier unpleasant experience of the evening by a comforting log-fire, a long, fragrant cigar, and a glass of Scotch whiskey. Miles, without moving his feet from the club-fender, indicated a decanter and glass and an open box on a stand. "Help yourself to what is left of Hamilton's cellar," he invited; "and light one of Uncle Mel's Havanas. The combination is very soothing to one who's been through the ups-and-downs I have to-night."

Dale did not feel the need of being soothed. He lighted a cigarette and dropped into an armchair. "What's become of Kelley?"

"He left a short time ago. Case of nerves;—he said he felt he'd got to get out of this house before the roof fell in on him." Miles smiled. "I don't know whether he'll come back, either. Looks like rats deserting a sinking ship, doesn't it?"

"Poor boy!" said Dale. "I don't wonder he was scared. I can imagine how I'd have felt if I'd seen you fall down like that at my feet."

Miles turned in his chair, though contriving to keep his feet still on the fender. "I have been rather rough with him. He's only a kid anyway. You know about it?—The little model he made love to? I thought I'd give him a good scare to teach him a lesson. But Pip blew up, went right through the ceiling. Why, he told me it would be all my fault if he did something we'd both regret all the rest of our lives."

"You have been hard on him, Miles. The poor fellow's been scared half out of his wits."

"Yes, he talked right up to me, as he's never done before. But, Dale, that doesn't explain why I got so raging mad. I wanted to give him a thrashing; I remember now that I said so. I wouldn't blame him for having tried to knock me down. But he didn't, Dale; he didn't much more than shove me away."

"You haven't any explanation for your condition up in the library, Miles?"

"You think I'd been drinking. Well, I'll admit that's a natural supposition under the circumstances. But, on my honor, I hadn't. I'd had a glass or two of wine at the dinner-table; but I was cold sober when I went up-stairs. I didn't begin to feel excited till we'd been talking some minutes."

"You drank some brandy, from one of Mr. Pryde's fine old liqueur glasses?"

Miles thought a moment, puffing at his cigar. "Yes,

I remember the brandy. I had a nip of that just before I left the room."

"Tell me about it. You drank it at the table?"

"Yes. We'd finished dinner. Pip had got up and was roaming about the room. Tyrrel was doing something, getting himself a cigarette, I think. I had pushed back from the table when Uncle Mel said, 'Bramwell, set out the brandy.' Uncle Mel likes his glass of brandy. So we all pulled up our chairs again."

"And the brandy was already poured in the glasses when Bramwell set them before you?"

Miles nodded. "Bramwell fills them at the sideboard. He always pours a glass for each of us, Clarice included. . . . And that's all. We each drank our glass. Pip and Tyrrel came back and had theirs. Uncle Mel finished his; he always does. And Clarice sipped hers. But, I say, Dale, you don't think a tiny glass like that would account for my performance? Surely my head's as strong as the others'?"

"I should think it was quite as strong; probably very much stronger," agreed Dale. "But there's one interesting point to be borne in mind. Each of you had his own separate glass, remember."

"Why, of course." But Miles' words were almost immediately followed by an intent stare. "What do you mean? You don't think my glass was different, do you?"

Dale waited, his eyes on the fire; waited until he judged that the full significance of this new idea had been taken in by the other.

"I have absolutely no proof," he said presently. "According to what you say, Bramwell fills all the glasses from a decanter of brandy on the sideboard and sets them on the table. And apparently Antonio is accustomed, under Mr. Pryde's instructions and because those particular glasses are very highly prized by their owner, to wash the glasses afterwards and put them away safely. That's what he did to-night. However,"—here Dale turned his eyes from the fire to the face of his companion,—“you don't seem to have been the first to become over-excited in the library after dining here. Nelson Lombard seems to have had very much the same experience; and, if I'm not mistaken, Wykoff Jay had too.”

"Good Lord! Is that so?" And after a moment's reflection Miles gave an abrupt nod. "I shouldn't wonder if it were. You think the glass I had to-night was drugged? And that Wykoff and Nelson were drugged too?"

"How else can you account for it?" asked Dale.

"But look here, man; it seems utterly absurd! Why should any one have wanted to drug me? Or to have drugged the others either? And if what you hint is

true, it must be that Bramwell was responsible, for he certainly gave me my glass. And what makes you hit on the brandy? Why wouldn't something else that I ate or drank at dinner do as well?"

Dale, however, was not prepared to tell how it happened that his attention had been focussed on the brandy. Nor did he wish, as yet, to involve the butler. "You will please tell no one about this," he said. "If you do, the consequences may be disastrous. I wanted to have this talk with you to learn how that particular glass was set before you, and to make sure that you drank from it. And please don't begin to blame Bramwell. Honestly now, you feel as well as ever, don't you?"

"I thought I did," Miles said. "Drugged! I don't like the notion at all. But how do you account for the fact that what happened to Wykoff and Nelson didn't happen to me?"

"Because you weren't left alone on the library floor for a minute."

Miles rose from his chair. "Great God, Dale! Who's at the bottom of all this? Is it a man or a devil?"

Dale also stood up, a grim smile on his lips. "Keep cool, keep cool. That's what we want to find out; but we won't if we have any fireworks. Don't start to suspect any one, and don't say a word about what we've

been discussing. Only I don't think I'd drink any more brandy under this particular roof."

"I won't," said Miles with all the positiveness he could muster.

"You're going to spend the night here?"

"I'd thought of it. It's rather late to get a train in town."

"I wish you would. Not that I think there's likely to be any trouble, but I believe Mr. Pryde would feel more comfortable."

"Very well, I'll stay. He keeps a room ready for me. Have a nightcap before you go?"

Dale held up his hands with a smile. "No thanks. And remember; keep your mouth shut."

In the big hall he lingered a moment, considering what next to do. From the drawing-room he heard voices and went in that direction. The curtains were drawn back and through the doorway he saw Pryde and Clarice, sitting close together in the glow of a red-shaded lamp.

Watching them, Dale's face brightened. Here was real, deep affection. The old man's head was bent, his hands were stretched on his knees. Beside him Clarice, her face raised, her hair a soft gold in the lamp-light, was murmuring something. She touched her uncle's hand, she drew it to her, she lifted it to her bosom. And Pryde looked up and smiled. "There,"

thought Dale, "is the one priceless thing he has found in America."

Awaiting an opportune moment, Dale went into the room. The eyes of the two seated there turned to him at once in question.

"No, I'm not much the wiser," he said. "I've thought and thought, and I've had a chat with Miles. He's perfectly fit again; and he's going to spend the night here, to keep you all company."

"Ralph is a great comfort," Pryde said; "but the greatest comfort of all is Clarice."

"I can believe that, sir. And then you have Mr. Tyrrel. Really you are fortunate in your faithful friends."

"Ambrose—yes—I don't know how I could manage without him. None of you can appreciate him as I do; he is so quiet, but so thoughtful. And yet I can't blame him if he wants to leave my house. These painful experiences ——"

"Does Mr. Tyrrel want to go, Uncle?" Clarice asked.

"He hasn't said so in words. But I can feel that he's getting restless. It's rather to be expected, isn't it? He hasn't found Hillcrest a very pleasant place. As for myself, I don't know what I'd have done here if it hadn't been for you, my dear."

Again Clarice lifted Pryde's hand and touched it

with her lips. Dale took a few steps down the room, then turned and came back.

“You and Mr. Tyrrel were together all the evening, weren’t you?” he asked. “You drank your brandy at the table and smoked your cigars and talked?”

“Yes, we stayed at the table for some time.” Pryde drew his hand across his forehead, pressed his brow with his fingers, as if the return to thoughts of what had happened since dinner gave him actual physical unrest. “Ralph and Pip went up-stairs,—you know all about that. Clarice was restless. I noticed it;—but then so were we all. I knew there was some little difficulty between Ralph and Pip; I think Ambrose had an inkling of it too. Clarice went out of the dining-room and came in here and began to play the piano. Antonio appeared and said he had something he wanted to say to me, so Ambrose got up and said he’d join Clarice.”

Dale glanced at Clarice in interrogation, and she immediately nodded.

“Yes, Mr. Tyrrel did come in; he played a little Italian air for me. But soon I got so restless that I couldn’t sit still, and excused myself and went up-stairs, as I told you.”

“Antonio spoke to you?” Dale turned back to Pryde.

“What he had to say wasn’t actually very important,” Pryde answered; “though it did seem to weigh on his mind. . . . Yes, even Antonio hasn’t seemed as stable as usual lately; I’ve noticed that he’s been—well, somehow different—at times. He asked me if I’d observed anything peculiar about the brandy; he appeared to think that it might have spoiled or gone wrong in some way. I told him I hadn’t noticed it. He gave me the impression that he had tasted it in the pantry and thought that it tasted rather queer.”

“And then Mr. Tyrrel rejoined you?”

“No, he stayed here, playing the piano. I sat at the table listening to him,—I could hear him quite plainly,—he often played for me in the evening at Fiesole; but he hasn’t played much here; he’s overly modest, and always says that Clarice plays so much better that it’s a shame for him to try. I think perhaps I nodded. An old man does get drowsy after dinner. And the next thing I remember was hearing Pip calling from up-stairs. Lord! that gave me a start, after what we’ve been through! I left the table and went out into the hall. But Ambrose was ahead of me; he was already half-way up the stairs.” Pryde again pressed his forehead with his fingers, puckering the skin into little ridges. “You know the rest, Dale, —what we heard in the library.”

“Yes, sir. And I think I know all I’m likely to know to-night.” Dale’s eyes traveled round the drawing-room as if he had an interest in each separate piece of furniture. “I won’t disturb you any more. You must be quite ready for bed.”

“Dale, if you could only help us—I wouldn’t mind any disturbance.” Pryde hesitated: “You see, it’s not only for myself, but for Clarice ——”

“I would do anything for Clarice, Mr. Pryde.”

“That’s right.” The old man’s eyes shone for a moment, the lines of his face grew more gentle. Then he stood up. “Good-night to both of you, my children. As Dale has suggested, I am quite ready for bed.”

Clarice went with him to the door, and to the foot of the staircase.

When she came back Dale was standing by the piano, fingering a sheet of music that was open on the rack.

“Well, Clement, what now?”

Dale turned, and for the second time that night their glances met and held each other.

“Will you do something for me?” Dale asked.

A flush, a swift shifting of her gaze; then again her eyes were on his.

“What do you want me to do? Anything in reason.”

"I want you to leave this house,—for a time, anyway."

"You saw how my uncle feels; how much he needs me."

"Nevertheless you must go away. You'll break down if you don't."

She freed her eyes, with difficulty, it seemed, from his insistent gaze. She took a few steps, her hands moving, uneasy.

"I had thought of making a short visit, to some friends in Baltimore. But that was before what happened to-night."

"Good. You must go. You need to."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "How abrupt you are with me, Clement. One would think you didn't set any value on my being here."

"Don't you see, Clarice? I'm frightened for you."

She stood still, and for an instant her eyes seemed to probe his mind.

"No, I can't tell you what I fear," he continued. "But the fear is there. If I could I'd shut up this house and send every soul in it packing, each in a different direction. What I think is sheer hypothesis. If I put it in words, it would be laughed at, and there'd be an end of my theories,—and the danger might come again. But this I do know,—you mustn't

stay in this house. If you won't go, I shall go to your uncle and tell him that he must make you."

"Oh, no, Clement, no, don't do that." Dale's look, his vehement speech, had made an impression. "But if I'm in danger, why aren't the rest of them too?"

"It may be that they are. . . . I don't know. . . . Miles was to-night, in my opinion. Of course I'm concerned about them; but not in the same way that I'm concerned about you. I've got to see that you're safe."

A wave of color swept over her face. She turned away, let her hand rest on the high back of a chair.

"I can't believe that any one—or anything—would deliberately harm me," she contended.

"Why not? Would you have believed that any one—or anything—would have deliberately harmed Jay or Lombard or Miles? Yet some one or something did. And what's become of the rest of your uncle's family? The Founts, the Harpers, and now Kelley? I don't think Pip will be back soon. . . . No, no, Clarice. From this minute I watch over you."

A hint of her old mocking smile showed in her eyes, her lips. "I'm a handful, Clement. You're taking on a good deal." Then immediately she was serious again. "I understand,—and I appreciate it. Yes, I do. Please don't have any doubt of that. And I will go away to-morrow and make my visit in Baltimore.

And perhaps when I come back I'll go to my apartment in town, if I find Uncle Melchior's all right."

"You'll write me before you come back? You'll let me judge as to what you ought to do then?"

"What a dragon you are! Yes, I'll let you know. But while I'm away you'll have an eye on my uncle, Clement?"

"He shan't suffer, if I can help it."

"I hate to leave him. Still, he has Ralph and Mr. Tyrrel and his faithful Antonio. All right; I promise, Clement. And if you want to make absolutely sure that I keep my word, you might come over to-morrow and take me in town to my train."

"I shan't come over. I shall be here. I intend to spend the night under this roof. I can telephone my house."

She looked her surprise. "Why—of course we'd like to have you; but do you think that's really necessary?"

"I shouldn't sleep a wink at home, thinking of you over here. I can sleep on a sofa, if need be."

"Oh, no, there are plenty of bedrooms. Bramwell will get one ready for you and find whatever you need. But, Clement, what could happen to me? I always lock my door; and I've been here now over three months."

“Nothing could happen, in all probability. But I want to be near at hand, for my own satisfaction.”

She gave him a fleeting smile. Was she secretly pleased at his determination to remain near her? He wanted to say something more, wanted to say a great deal more. But she, perhaps anticipating this, moved quickly to the doorway.

“I’ll tell Bramwell at once. You’ll find the telephone in the writing-room. Breakfast at eight. And I hope you’ll sleep soundly, Clement, and won’t have me too much on your mind.”

XVI

CLARICE COMES BACK

Nothing more happened that night. Dale, descending to breakfast in the morning, was received with considerable surprise by Pryde and Tyrrel and Miles, but he explained, without a great many words, that after Miles' unpleasant experience the night before, he had thought it advisable to remain near at hand, in case his help might be needed.

Miles said that he felt as well as ever, and his appearance and appetite completely justified his statement. Clarice came down in a plum-colored dress that was markedly becoming, and, from her seat at the head of the table, poured the coffee for her uncle and his guests. Conversation was brisk. It was a fine, frosty morning. The doubts and fears that had hung like cobwebs over the old house the night before seemed dissipated in the daylight.

After breakfast Clarice told her uncle of her projected visit to Baltimore. She did not mention Dale's insistence, nor give any other reason for her going except the natural one that she wanted to see some friends who had repeatedly urged her to come. She

could come at any time by simply sending them a wire. "But if you don't want me to go, Uncle dear ——" she said.

"I do want you to go," Pryde quickly answered. "You deserve a good time, my dear, if any girl ever did."

Dale, who was a party to the scene, thought that he detected a certain relief in Pryde's reply.

"I'll write you every other day," Clarice assured her uncle. "And if you want me to come back,—for any reason whatever,—all you have to do is to let me know, and I'll be here immediately. And Clement has promised me to keep an eye on you." She looked from Pryde to the younger man and back. "I've made my plans to go this morning, if you're willing. Clement is going in town with me. I'll send a telegram to let them know I'm coming; and take a train that'll get me to Baltimore in plenty of time for lunch."

"Go, with my blessing," said Pryde. "And don't hurry back on my account. I shall get along somehow. And so," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "will Dale, I fancy, if he has to."

As Dale drove his car around from the garage to the terrace, Tyrrel, in cap and ulster, stepped out and joined Clarice. "I think your little trip is an excellent idea," he said warmly. "It will do you good. There's nothing like a change of scene. I wish I could

get your uncle to go away for a short time. Perhaps, when you come back, you'll be able to help me persuade him."

"You must be very kind to him," Clarice urged. "Uncle Melchior told us last night he didn't know how he could possibly get on without you, Mr. Tyrrel."

"Oh, but he could, you know. It's you he couldn't do without now. Men are never indispensable, are they, Mr. Dale? But the ladies ——"

"That's so," agreed Dale. "All aboard, if we're going to catch that train."

Tyrrel handed Clarice in, and then gave Dale her suitcase. As the two drove off the tall man on the terrace steps waved his hand in farewell.

"Hillcrest is such a lovely place!" sighed Clarice as she settled into her corner. "On such a morning as this, when the place is all bright and shining, it seems absurd to feel about it as we did last night."

The same thought was in Dale's mind. Everything seemed natural and cheerful. The fine old trees, their bare boughs shot with sunlight, were a pleasure to the eye.

"That's the way you ought to think about this place," he said. "It ought to be the happiest house to be found anywhere. Your uncle deserves such a home. We've got to make it right for him."

"You do like him, don't you, Clement?"

“I think he’s the salt of the earth.”

“You didn’t lie awake last night, fearing some harm for me?”

“I’m not going to tell you what I did. Last night is past. Remember the old saying,—To-morrow is another day.”

Persistently he kept her talking of other things until they reached the railroad station. In town he put her on board her train, a pile of magazines beside her, and begged her not to worry a moment about Hillcrest but to have a fine, care-free time. “Of course I’d like you to think about me now and then,” he added.

“What an egotist! To think about you, and not about the others.”

The train was ready to pull out. “Good-bye, Clement. You’ll write me if I’m needed?”

“You’ll let me know when you’re coming back?”

He hopped off, waved his hat at her window, wished he had said a number of other things, and, finding himself on the now deserted platform, walked away deep in thought.

He was immensely relieved that Clarice had left Hillcrest. He confessed to himself that he didn’t know what he should have done if she had refused to go. But he couldn’t have let her stay there. He would have done something, anything, to get her out of that house.

Now he was determined that she should not go back there. He would meet her at the station, when she wrote him that she was returning, and see that she went to her apartment and make her promise that she would stay in town. Of course she would want to see her uncle;—Dale couldn't possibly prevent her doing that;—but he intended that if she did see Pryde at Hillcrest she should be safeguarded in every way he could devise.

Especially he feared the night at Hillcrest; and looking back on the events of the past months he felt thoroughly justified in his fears.

Pryde's situation disturbed him; and yet he doubted if there was much personal danger for Pryde. The old man appeared to be immune. It was his nephews and nieces who were in peril.

During the days that followed Dale kept in touch with Hillcrest. Everything seemed serene there. Kelley did not come back; had not been heard from. Miles, on the other hand, persisted in staying; made a boast of his devotion to his uncle, and pointed out, whenever he had the chance, that it was he, and he alone, who still stood by the head of the house.

Dale, busy with other things, thought less about Hillcrest, though continually about Clarice. A week passed, and then another; and he began to wonder

how soon he might expect a letter from her, telling the day of her return.

Kept at his office later than usual on a Wednesday evening, Dale had dinner in town, and by the time he reached the suburban station nearest to his home it was nine o'clock. He did not have far to walk, and he set off over the hard-frozen road; enjoying the cold air and the stillness and the wide sky, filled with stars. As usual, his thoughts turned to Clarice. Against the background of mystery that Hillcrest represented, she stood out so fine and fair, fairer perhaps for her very situation, at any event more to be cared for and protected than if she were not so placed. He wondered how soon he should see her; wondered what she was doing at that moment; whether some other man was talking to her. He passed the gates of Hillcrest, the park, holding the house somewhere within its depths, now a black, looming mass; and went on over the rutted highroad to his own Rockledge.

Letting himself in with his latch-key, he hung up his hat and coat and proceeded to the library, where, as usual, his father and mother sat on opposite sides of the lamp at the centre table. Each looked up with an affectionate greeting for their only child. Dale sat down with a smile of satisfaction. "I couldn't get away from the office till after seven," he explained. "Then I had a bite of dinner at the station restaurant."

"That explains why I couldn't find you," said his mother. "I telephoned your club, but they said you weren't there. A telegram came for you a little while ago." She pointed to the yellow envelope displayed on the mantelpiece. "I thought perhaps you'd like me to telephone you the message. That's why I opened it."

Evidently, to judge from her tone, there was nothing urgent in it. Dale got up, took out the enclosure, and unfolded it. "Coming back to-night. Hope to see you soon. Clarice Pryde." He read it a couple of times, his brow puckered.

"You know what it says," he said, turning to his mother. "Miss Pryde has been in Baltimore. She promised to let me know when she was coming back. I wish she'd sent this to the office; I could have met her train."

"But it didn't arrive here until after you'd left the office," Mrs. Dale pointed out. "If she'd sent it there you wouldn't have got it till to-morrow morning."

"That's so." Dale frowned. "I wish she'd sent it earlier in the day. I wonder why she didn't. It looks as if she'd suddenly decided to come back."

Mrs. Dale regarded her tall son with a fond, though half-humorous, smile. "Well, my dear, you can see her in the morning, if it's so very important. I suppose she'll be over at Hillcrest."

Dale moved uneasily. "I hope she hasn't gone there."

"Why not telephone over and see?" his father suggested.

"Yes." Dale went toward the telephone on its little stand at the end of the room, then stopped. "No. If she is there, she'll put me off till the morning. I know what she'll say."

"Well, you must remember, Clement," said his father, attempting to lighten the frown that this seemingly-innocent message appeared to have brought to his son's brow, "that Miss Pryde is free, white, and over twenty-one years of age. And it's not altogether unnatural that she should go to her uncle's house to spend the night, all things considered, is it?"

"Not unnatural, no." But Dale's tone was not responsive to his father's gentle raillery. His thoughts were somewhere else. After a few moments he glanced at the clock. "Quarter to ten. I'll go over to Hillcrest. It's possible I may spend the night there. If I do, I'll telephone."

"What is this all about?" asked the elder Dale, taking off his eye-glasses and scrutinizing his son closely. "Is there really a reason why Miss Pryde shouldn't have gone there?"

"Yes, I think there is. But I don't believe she appreciates the reason as strongly as I do. She's been

away several weeks, in a totally different atmosphere, and she doesn't take some things as seriously as she did before she went. That's what worries me."

"Clement, what's wrong at Hillcrest?"

"Father, I wish I knew. But I don't know—certainly. It isn't a safe place for Clarice—for Miss Pryde."

From his tone the father and mother understood that they should ask no more questions; this was a subject that their son preferred to keep private. But when the latter had left the room the elder Dale raised a questioning eyebrow at his wife. "Have you any inkling, Mary?" he inquired in a subdued voice.

"None about the troubles at Hillcrest, Henry. I know that Clement thinks about affairs over there a great deal."

"Affairs over there?" Mr. Dale smiled. "Well, Miss Pryde is a nice girl. I always thought her the sensible kind."

"Nice,—sensible! What masculine adjectives!"

"Well, Clement is masculine, isn't he? Oh, I understand. 'Nice' and 'sensible' are used by fathers; but sons and mothers prefer 'intriguing,' 'dashing' or 'smart.'"

"I never said any such thing." Mrs. Dale picked up her book. "Anyway, I know that Clement regards

Miss Pryde as a sort of client. 'That's why he's gone to see her now.'

There was the barest suggestion of a sniff as Mr. Dale replaced his glasses and resumed his evening newspaper.

Meantime the son had his car out from the garage and was driving over to Hillcrest. 'He was both perplexed and disturbed. Why had Clarice given him such short notice of her return? Didn't she want him to meet her? Was she afraid that he might try to persuade her to do what she didn't wish to?

Had Melchior Pryde sent for her to come back at once? Was that the reason she hadn't been able to notify Dale any earlier in the day? And if Pryde had, what was the cause for his sending? . . . A hundred questions presented themselves, went unanswered. But each, it seemed, only added to Dale's uneasiness.

The night was clear, but the trees of the park at Hillcrest stood so close together that they hid the stars. The headlights pierced through the dark, and threw a circle of yellow on the road, on the shrubs; at last, on the steps to the terrace. Dale drove around to the side, and turned off his engine. As he went to the door he had the feeling that he was intruding on Hillcrest; but the need of seeing Clarice at once conquered all other feelings.

He pushed the little button that rang the electric bell, and while he waited stamped his feet impatiently on the doorstep. It seemed to him that Bramwell was taking a long time to answer his ring. It was now somewhat after ten; but he had seen lights on the second floor of the house. He rang again, while the feeling returned that his arrival at this particular time might not be altogether welcome.

It was not Bramwell who ultimately opened the door, but Antonio. The servant peered out, something in his attitude suggesting that he was on the defensive.

“Is Miss Pryde here?” asked Dale.

Antonio nodded. Reluctantly he moved aside to allow the caller to enter.

There was only one light in the hall, and that was at some distance, at the foot of the staircase. The house was silent, and seemed to Dale chill.

“Well,” said Dale, pulling off his overcoat, “I’d like to see Miss Pryde.” He turned rather sharply;—Antonio was so quiet and so watchful;—all Dale’s distrust of the man came to the surface again. “Has Bramwell gone to bed?”

“Bramwell has left Mr. Pryde, sir.”

“That’s news to me. When did he go?”

“The day before yesterday.”

Dale recollected that he himself had not been to

Hillcrest for four days. "What was the reason for his leaving?"

"I don't know, sir." And after a moment's hesitation, Antonio added, "The cook and I are the only servants here now."

The words struck on Dale's ears with the force of some ulterior meaning. The household was dissolving, disintegrating, one by one. Pryde was still there, and Antonio Poppi; and Tyrrel and Miles, he supposed;—and a cook. Dale shook off the impulse to puzzle over this situation, and again eyed Antonio sharply.

"Please tell Miss Pryde I should like to see her at once."

"Yes, sir. She is with her uncle. He is unwell at present."

"Mr. Pryde ill? Not seriously, I hope?"

"Not seriously, I think. He hasn't been in his usual health for several days."

Dale wondered if Antonio thought this news would cause the caller to withdraw. Poppi had not moved toward the stairs.

"Tell her I am here," Dale repeated.

Antonio started across the hall; but was followed by another question. "Mr. Tyrrel and Mr. Miles are in the house?"

"They were both here to dinner, and afterwards

they both went up to Mr. Pryde's room. I haven't seen them since."

Then the servant stole to the stairs and up them, while Dale felt a hot desire to send an oath after him.

The house was silent again, undisturbed except for Dale's impatient footsteps. It seemed he had long to wait, while over and over he told himself that her uncle's indisposition was the reason for Clarice's unexpected return.

Then he heard a sound on the stairway, and going quickly forward, saw Clarice coming down. She was flesh and blood, and smiling. Dale gave a little laugh at the joy of seeing her again.

"You got my wire, Clement?"

"I got it. But too late to meet you."

Their hands met in a long grip.

"You're cold, Clement. This old house is chilly. I oughtn't to have gone away. No, don't shake your head. I really shouldn't have done it. Uncle Melchior's sick, and the housekeeping's at sixes and sevens. No one but men. I don't see how they get along. . . . But come into the writing-room and warm up." She led the way across the hall. "I'm glad you came when you did. I was just going to indulge in a cup of coffee. Now you can have one too."

The little room was warm, for a fire burned on the

hearth. Before a chair was a low stand, on which were a coffee percolator, a cup, sugar and cream.

"I keep extra cups in this cupboard," said Clarice, going to a cabinet in the corner. "Light a cigarette and sit down. As you've probably guessed, they sent me a wire to tell me Uncle Melchior wasn't well. That's why I couldn't let you know sooner, and why I came out here at once. I only got here an hour or so ago. He isn't really very sick, but I am so glad that I came. What do men know about looking after invalids, or making themselves comfortable anyhow?" She came back with a cup and saucer. "It takes a woman to do that. As soon as I had got here and seen Uncle Melchior I had Antonio light a fire in here and get the coffee things. It is rather cosy, isn't it?"

"It is," agreed Dale. "And, Clarice, I'm delighted to see you again; even though I do wish ——"

"Now, Clement, now don't be foolish. I've forgotten all our bad dreams." She fastened a plug into the baseboard and turned the electric current into the percolator. "Think of my poor, dear uncle. He was delighted to see me, without any qualifications. He's somewhat querulous, though; he didn't want me to go out of his sight. I may have to slip up-stairs again in a few minutes, to see if he's gone to sleep."

Dale, with the warmth of the room and the fragrance of boiling coffee pleasing to his senses, and the

proximity of Clarice—near him again after what seemed a long absence—delicious to his thoughts, allowed himself to be lulled into a comfortable, docile frame of mind. Evidently Melchior Pryde's illness was not of a disturbing nature. With his niece to run in and see to his wants and cheer him up he would doubtless be on the mend by to-morrow. And until then Dale would stay at the house and keep an eye on events. He was very glad Clarice had come back, so long as he could be near her.

"It seems as if you'd been away a year instead of a fortnight," he said. "I looked every day for a letter."

"Why, I didn't know you expected me to write," she answered, pretending a glance of surprise. "Except, of course, to tell you when I was returning."

"I hoped you would. I wrote you—let me see—three letters."

"Very nice letters they were." Clarice, her fair head bent above the percolator, appeared to be investigating the progress of boiling. "I suppose you've been very busy?"

"Not too busy to wonder what you were doing. Did you have a very gay time?"

"Pretty gay, for me. Baltimore's famous for its parties, you know. There are so many attractive young bachelors ——"

"No, Clarice, no, don't tell me about them. I want to talk about you. You're looking wonderful."

"I think the coffee's ready." She lifted the coffee-pot and filled one of the small cups.

"Clarice, I don't believe your uncle missed you half as much as I did."

Dale's suddenly earnest tone made her flush, broke in on her composure. "There"—she said, as if looking for a new turn to give their talk, "there, that makes me think. I wonder if Uncle Melchior wouldn't like some coffee too. How selfish I am." She slipped out of her chair. "I'll go and ask him." And she added as a teasing afterthought: "You can stay here and figure out exactly how much you missed me. I'll get Uncle Melchior's figures, and then we can compare notes."

"You'll come back right away?"

"It may take him a little time to work out his total," she continued, provocatively. "But don't be afraid. I'll come back. I wouldn't like to miss my coffee."

"This cup you've poured will be cold."

She looked back from the open doorway. "Drink it quickly then. I'll pour you another later."

She disappeared in the direction of the stairs. Dale stretched his legs, reflecting that he wouldn't mind sitting up all night in such pleasant circumstances.

The coffee was tantalizing;—what a shame to let it grow cold. As Clarice said, he could have another cup when she came back. He reached out his hand to the stand, picked up the cup she had filled, dropped in a lump of sugar, stirred it with the tiny spoon, and then, after a preliminary sip of appraisal, drank the coffee quickly.

Again silent minutes passed. Clarice must have been gone at least a quarter of an hour. Why was her uncle keeping her so long? If he were sick, he ought to be asleep by now. He was a tiresome old fellow. Didn't he know that Dale was waiting downstairs?

More time passed. Dale grew fidgety, nervous. He couldn't very well go up, knock on Pryde's door, and tell him that he wanted Clarice; but that was what he would have liked to do. Probably the old man was making her sit beside him, possibly making her read him to sleep. How thoughtless Pryde was, utterly selfish, thinking only of himself when down here he, Dale, was waiting for his coffee.

Dale got up, morose, indignant, on the verge of anger. He walked about the room, which was now uncomfortably warm. He went to a window and viciously pulled the curtain aside, unbolted the catch, and thrust up the window. He stared at the dark park. What a desolate look it had. What a beastly

place this house was;—a beastly place for Clarice with that old fool her uncle.

He turned, resentful, angry. He didn't like any of these men, Pryde, Tyrrel, Miles, Antonio. Especially he didn't like Antonio; he'd love to wring his neck. Antonio was a thief, a snake, a villain. And here was Clarice in a house with a man like that,—Clarice, his—Dale's—Clarice. It was horrible.

Why didn't Clarice come back? Was her uncle preventing her? Didn't the old scamp like Dale? Didn't he want his niece to give Dale a cup of coffee? . . . Very well, he should learn that Dale wouldn't be treated in that way. . . . He should know that Dale was every bit as good a man as any Melchior Pryde!

Dale went to the door and glared out into the hall. What was the matter with this house? First it was too cold, and now it was like a furnace. And why didn't they light it better? Why didn't Bramwell—no, Bramwell had gone—why didn't Antonio turn on all the lights?

Antonio was a rascal. He had some sinister reason for keeping the place so dim. Dale decided to find him and tell him so to his face. First he would see Antonio, then he would see Pryde, and find out why he was keeping Clarice all to himself. . . .

He stepped out into the hall. It seemed to him that

the curtains at the double doors of the drawing-room opposite moved a little.

“Antonio!” called out Dale.

There was no answer, no movement of the curtains.

Dale rubbed his eyes. They smarted. He muttered: “I know you’re not there. But I’ll find you. I’ll find you. And then I’ll find old Pryde.”

He crossed the hall to the staircase, and hesitated, his hand on the newel-post. Antonio? No, he would find Clarice first. Find out what had delayed her; what was threatening her. If these men were trying to keep her away from him, were ill-treating her, he’d fight them all,—yes, every last one of them! He wanted to fight some one; every nerve in his body was crying aloud for action.

He laid his hand on the stair-rail and went up, stealthily, apprehensively. Once he stopped and looked down, quivering, murmuring. Then again he raised his foot and went on. A board creaked, and he jumped, steadying himself with difficulty. . . .

XVII

IN THE LIBRARY

WHEN Dale reached the top of the staircase and stood for a moment in the second-floor hall,—which was only illuminated by what light came up from the single electric bulb on the lower floor,—there were three people he wanted to find, but he was in some doubt as to where to look for them. Should he go to the door of Pryde's room; or to the door of Clarice's? But, as it turned out, he went to neither; for, as he stood there trying to make up his mind, he distinctly heard the sound of a footstep in the library.

The library door was open, but the room was dark. The footstep, followed by stillness again, made Dale angry. Some one was prowling about, some one was up to mischief. He was in no state of mind or nerves to stand any more mystery. And with his rage rising so that it tightened his muscles and made his breath come quick, he crossed the open space of the hall and went into the library.

The room was dark,—all the curtains were drawn, —and cold; so cold that it made Dale suddenly shiver. He had a mad idea to run about the room, swinging

his arms like flails, in an attempt to find and beat down the man whose step he had heard.

Instead he caught at the divan, and as he stood shivering, there came into his mind—into that part of it which was still clear and reasoning—the recollection of what had happened here to Jay and Lombard and Miles.

He clutched the arm of the divan, bent over it, trying to master a sense of horror that was stifling him like a cloak. Those others had been in this room—those others. . . . Those others had been in this trap of a library. . . .

He ground his teeth; he wanted to annihilate something,—almost anything would do,—but he knew he mustn't. He must hold on; he must keep that little part of his brain clear; he must . . . he must. . . .

Suddenly he thought of the light. What a Godsend the light would be! What a help to him in fighting this thing through!

He loosened his grip on the divan, he got his back to the mantel, reached his fingers along the wall cautiously,—oh, so very cautiously,—until they touched the electric switch.

A moment's hesitation;—what might not the light reveal? . . . Then he gave a twist of his fingers, a tremendous thing to do under the circumstances.

He stood, back to the wall, trembling, shrinking. The light was dazzling, blinding. But he saw that the room was empty, though his senses contradicted his eyes.

Then, before he could catch at any support, he slipped from the wall, and fell, face up, full length on the stone hearth.

There he lay, not so much stunned by his fall as feeling that a sea of unconsciousness was lapping him all about, ready to flow up and flood his senses, drown his hold on reality, unless he could manage to keep that pin-point of his brain clear.

It was like the beam of a lighthouse round the tower of which great breakers leaped, trying to put out the single eye that shone across the water; only that in Dale's case the breakers were neither fierce nor jarring, rather soft and caressing, drugging his mind to sleep.

Continually they came, those heavy, enveloping waves, and every time some spark within him fought them. He had not the strength to move, not even to open his eyelids wide; to make a sound was utterly beyond him.

He fought subconsciously, somewhere deep in the inner springs of his being. He knew that he must hold on, must not surrender to these urgent, seductive waves. He did not know the reason, he could not af-

ford to expend the mental energy needful to work that out, but that there was a reason was the root of the will-power that kept up his resistance.

He had lost all sense of time, even of place or personality. He was simply a light burning in a space, a point of sentient feeling in a waste of unconsciousness. He would not let the waves overwhelm him, he would not . . . would not . . . would not. . . .

Gradually he gained a little respite. The waves did not come so fast nor urge him quite so strongly. More of his mind cleared of fog. He could not move nor utter a sound; but his eyelids were not so heavy. He could lift them enough to see there was light about him; and he felt very thankful for that.

To fight in the light was better than to fight in the darkness; reassurance came, very slight, very unstable; but it gave added strength to his will.

He knew where he was now. He could look down the length of the library. He still had no feeling of being a physical body, with a head and arms and legs. He was only a mind to register certain impressions and try, by dint of great labor, to learn what those impressions meant.

The waves began to ebb, he was conscious that they grew less. The power of his brain expanded, the range of his thoughts enlarged. He might use some energy

to try to understand things; no longer was there the need to devote every bit of his powers to fighting against the flood.

Then something caught his eye, something in the room had moved. It was a door; it had opened toward him. He could see it beyond the divan and beyond the centre table. He knew what door it was;—the one against which the heavy globe usually stood, the door into the closet.

And that recollection sent fresh blood to his brain, registered new thoughts. The closet door!—That meant? What did it mean? . . . Danger!

He willed to move; but he could not. He shut his eyes and tried to summon all his forces. Some one had opened that door and some one was coming out. He was taking a long time about it; he was being very cautious. But he would come, would steal down the room, and would find Dale lying on the hearth.

Again Dale tried to move his arms, his legs; and again he failed.

His thoughts went coursing on. Some one would find him lying there, helpless, impotent; and then there would happen to him what had happened to Jay and Lombard, and almost happened to Miles.

He knew that he could do nothing, and for a moment his brain reeled. It was so horrible to be snuffed

out now, after the fight he had waged. Then, with all his will, he pulled his senses together. He could at least see what was coming, even if he could not oppose it.

Yes, he had been right. Some one was coming toward him. He could see feet moving, though the body of his enemy was hidden from him by a high-backed chair. The man was moving with the utmost stealth, making no sound; but the feet were coming nearer, nearer, sliding over the floor.

Dale tried to speak; no sound came. He was only eyes and a brain.

Then above the chair rose a head, the head of Antonio Poppi.

Never had Dale seen eyes glitter and gleam as did those of Poppi as they encountered Dale's.

Now Dale understood; Poppi had killed Jay and had killed Lombard. And here was his third victim ready for his hand.

How would he strike? with a knife, with one quick, savage blow? Dale shut his eyes and made one supreme effort. A low gasp, a slight twist of his forearm was all that he could achieve.

But Poppi had heard him, and in a bound came forward. His eyes shone down, steel bright; the muscles of his jaws were twitching. He held something in his hand, something that seemed to glitter.

Yet, in that moment of moments, Dale contrived to keep his eyes open, his senses intact to meet what might be coming.

Poppi stooped, sank on his knees, and with a rough hand thrust Dale's jaws apart. The glittering thing was a bottle; he poured a few drops from it down Dale's throat.

Dale felt a burning sensation, and his eyes closed in spite of his will. The next thing he knew he was being dragged up from the hearth, was being thrust down on the divan like a log of wood. . . .

The burning sensation passed; Dale found he could move his body. He opened his eyes and encountered Poppi's fixed on him.

"Well?" Dale murmured.

"That's better, sir. I thought it would work that way." The man was actually smiling, something Dale had never seen him do before.

"Well?" Dale repeated, still uncomprehending.

"You're safe, sir; you're safe. I had my eye on you this time."

Dale raised himself on the divan. He found that his muscles obeyed him; and he swung his feet to the floor.

"Antonio, I don't know what's happened to me. I've been lying there, practically senseless, for hours and hours."

“Not for hours and hours. I saw you come in here, about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Fifteen minutes! You saw me?” Dale brushed his hands across his eyes, his forehead. “I don’t understand.”

The servant stood back, a curious smile drawing his lips away from his teeth. There was also that strange gleam in his eyes that had so terrified Dale when he had first seen Antonio creeping across the room.

“Ah, you don’t understand, sir? I should scarcely expect that you would. Your mind was not very clear when you came up the stairs—yes, not more than fifteen minutes ago, as I have said.”

“No,” Dale admitted; and then, as he felt his senses steady and his power of recollection return from the mists that had obscured it, he added: “I was tremendously angry; and at the same time frightened. I don’t think I was ever so furious in my life. It seemed as if something intolerable was goading me on.”

“I was in here. I saw you through the door. I knew that you were angry.”

“I remember I heard a footstep.”

“It was mine. I wanted to see what would happen.”

Dale’s mind was perfectly clear now. It seemed to him that he felt as fit and vigorous as ever. “Well,

you saw me fall here. By the way, what was that stuff you gave me? ”

“ Never mind that now, sir. I am a bit of a chemist. But what I expected to see happen didn't take place.”

The two looked at each other, and each read the other's thoughts.

“ What is perplexing me,” said Antonio slowly, “ is why nothing did happen. The house was quiet: no one knew I was here; and you were completely helpless. There was every opportunity.”

“ Antonio, why was I so furiously angry, and then so weak, so passive? ”

“ I think that's entirely clear, sir. You had taken the drug.”

Again Dale stared at the servant, who smiled back at him and shrugged his shoulders.

“ The drug? . . . But I hadn't, Antonio. I haven't touched a drop of brandy or any wine to-night.”

“ Think. You must have, Mr. Dale. It may not have been in wine. But certainly it was in something.”

Dale stood up. “ The coffee! Miss Pryde made me a cup of coffee in the writing-room.”

“ And you drank it, sir? ”

Dale nodded. “ I drank a small cup. But don't you understand? I say Miss Pryde made it for me. I saw her make it and pour it into the cup.”

“Well, sir,”—Antonio shrugged;—“isn’t that sufficient? You drank it. You know what followed.”

There was an angry frown on Dale’s brow. “Be careful, Antonio. Miss Pryde boiled the coffee in a percolator on the table and poured it hot into an empty cup.”

“How do you know it was empty?”

“Why, man, you don’t think ——”

Antonio held out a quieting hand. “Pardon me, Mr. Dale, but I beg you to do the thinking. What do you know about that particular cup? Did you get it from the dining-room?”

Dale made an effort to be calm, to recollect clearly every detail of what had happened. “I went into the writing-room with Miss Pryde. She told me she had been about to have some coffee before she went up-stairs. The percolator was on the table and one cup, a cream pitcher and a sugar-bowl. Miss Pryde got another cup from a cabinet in the corner. I sat down and talked while she boiled the coffee. She poured some into a cup, and then she went up-stairs to see if her uncle would like some. She told me to drink what was poured; it would get cold; and she would give me some more when she came back. So I drank the cup.”

“Precisely, sir. Do you recollect which cup it was you drank from,—the one that had been on the table

when you went into the room,—that is, Miss Pryde's cup,—or the one that she took out of the cabinet? ”

Dale considered a moment. “ I think it was the original one on the table. That was the nearest to where she was sitting.”

“ Then the drug was in that one, sir. Of course you will understand that I never intended to suggest that Miss Pryde knew anything about it.”

“ You mean—why, you must mean that the drug was intended for her! ”

Antonio bent his head. That, and his outspread hands, were a sufficient answer.

“ Thank God, I took it, not she! ” Instantly Dale was excited. “ But this is too horrible! To treat a woman like that! ”

“ It is, Mr. Dale,” Antonio agreed fervently. “ But, as it fell out, Miss Pryde is still safe.”

“ How do I know she is? This terrible place! ” Dale was silent. “ Antonio,” he went on, “ I must see her at once.”

The servant nodded and stood aside.

They went into the hall. The house was perfectly quiet.

Dale leaned over the stair-rail, and called down, “ Clarice! ”

There was no answer, though he called again, and waited several minutes.

“ Mr. Pryde’s door? ”

Antonio indicated it, at the front, a little way down the hall.

Dale knocked; knocked again. Presently came a thin voice. “ Yes. What is it? Come in.”

They entered. Pryde was in bed, a small night-lamp burning on a stand.

“ Clarice isn’t with you? ” said Dale.

Pryde propped himself up on an elbow. “ She was here, but she left me some time ago. What’s the matter? Is anything wrong? ”

“ I’ll go to her door,” Dale said shortly.

Antonio showed him the door. Dale knocked. There was no answer. Again and again he knocked, fear seizing him by the throat. At last he opened the door, went in, turned on the light. The room was empty; the bed was untouched.

“ She’s not here,” said Dale. “ We’ll search every room in the house.”

He and Antonio did so. Melchior Pryde, in dressing-gown and slippers, helped them. But Clarice was not, so far as they could discover, in any room of Hillcrest.

XVIII

THE COTTAGE IN THE WOODS

THE search aroused the cook, an elderly woman, who gaped at the three men from the door of her room, and told them that she had seen nothing of Miss Clarice all the evening. And the cook appeared to be the only person, besides the three searchers, who was in the house. Neither Tyrrel nor Miles was to be found. Tyrrel's bed had not been slept in, and the bed in the room usually occupied by Miles when he spent the night at Hillcrest was undisturbed.

Pryde, in spite of his illness, had insisted on making the rounds with Dale and Antonio. When they were certain that Clarice was not there, Pryde laid his hand on Dale's arm. "Find her! Find her!" he implored. "Dale, find her and bring her back to me safe! Call the police! Rouse the whole neighborhood! Do anything, anything, Dale; but bring her back to me!"

"Yes, yes, we'll find her," said Dale. "But you must go back to bed." And with Antonio's help he managed to get the shivering old man in his room again and settled in a chair.

"Now," said Dale, "the cook will have an eye on you. You've only to ring that bell and she'll come at once."

"What are you going to do?" Pryde demanded.

"Find Clarice somehow. I don't know how yet; but I'm going to find her. Will you promise to stay here?"

"I'll promise anything if you'll bring her back."

"All right. Don't worry. We'll do it."

But when Dale and Antonio stood in the hall again the lawyer's lips were compressed, his brow was furrowed. "We've absolutely nothing to go on, so far as I can see," he muttered.

"Will you trust me?" said Antonio. "No questions asked? Will you do exactly as I say?"

Dale looked inquiringly at Pryde's servant. Antonio's usually stolid expression had vanished; he seemed to be quivering with eagerness, impatience.

"What do you mean?"

"I've served Mr. Pryde for many years, and I served you to-night in the library. I was armed, sir." Antonio drew from his hip pocket a small automatic revolver. "I was going to fight for you in there. And I may be able to serve you both now, if you'll only trust me."

"I will, Antonio." Dale meant it. All his earlier dislike and suspicion of the man were gone, had been

driven away in the last half-hour. "But quick! quick! we're losing time talking."

Antonio went down the stairs. "You've got your car outside?" he flung over his shoulder. "All right. I'll be ready in a minute."

"Hadn't we better call up the police?"

"They'd be no help now. I beg you to do as I say, sir."

Dale obeyed. He put on his coat and cap and ran outdoors to his car. When he drove up to the front door Antonio was there, in cap and heavy ulster.

They were off with a rush. "Where are we going?" asked Dale, as they reached the highroad.

Antonio held a roughly-drawn map in his hands and was studying it by the light on the dashboard. "To the left," he answered. "To the old turnpike house, then to the right."

Dale settled himself in his seat. Wild and mysterious as this ride appeared,—with a companion who would explain nothing,—he seemed to have no choice but to obey Antonio's bidding. The man knew something, or suspected something. And Dale himself had no idea where to hunt for Clarice.

Antonio glanced at the motor-clock. "Ten minutes to one," he said. "It must have been a little after eleven when you went into the library. An hour-and-a-half's start."

“What does that mean?”

But Antonio wouldn't explain. He sat back, sombre and silent, his eyes continually on the map in his hands.

Dale tried to piece things together. Some one had intended to drug Clarice, had indeed put the drug in her coffee cup. She would in all probability have drunk it had he not arrived and by accident drunk it instead of her. Nothing had happened to him except his strange experience in the library. But what had happened to her?

Some one had seen her go up-stairs to her uncle's room. What happened to Dale had clearly been immaterial to this worker of evil. He had let Dale alone. But thwarted of Clarice in the way he had planned he had taken her in another way, had seized her after she came out from Pryde's room and while Dale was lying on the library floor.

What did this person mean to do? What had befallen Clarice? Dale dreaded to think any further. He could not; the affair was a blank. But he shook with apprehension.

And here he was, entirely dependent on this strange, mysterious man who gave no clue to his thoughts. At a crossroads only a word or two from his guide, only a nod of the head, and Dale, like a piece of machinery, shifted the wheel and drove on.

They met no other cars, for it was now long after midnight, and the country they were traversing was one of large farms and few houses, pasture-lands and cultivated fields, intersected by frequent wooded ridges and occasional streams. Dale knew it in a general way. He had driven over most of these roads before. But though he tried to work out some logical reason to explain the route they were taking, he found himself as completely baffled as though they were driving through country entirely new.

An hour had passed in this silent, swift-coursing way when Antonio leaned forward and looked out from the side of the car. "Please drive slowly now, sir," he said. "We can't be far from our goal."

Dale saw a wide field, a private road leading up to a low house and big barn. A silo stood out squat and black in the light of the stars. The scene was peaceful enough; about it the remoteness of a landscape on a frosty winter night.

The road took a dip; they crossed an iron bridge over an ice-bound brook. Antonio consulted his map. "We should come to a fork in a minute now, with a sign-board," he muttered. "Goshen and Jeffersonville."

Beyond the brook were trees. The road ran through a wood. And shortly they reached the fork. "Stop," said Antonio. Dale obeyed. He swung his pilot-light

around so that it shone on the sign-board. Plainly visible were the words "Goshen" and "Jeffersonville."

"I'll get out and find a place where we can leave the car," Antonio said, descending. After a few minutes' survey he directed Dale where he could drive his car between the trees. It was safely off the highroad and almost completely concealed. Dale took the key, snapped on a lock, and joined Antonio in the thicket.

"Follow me," said Antonio; "and no noise, if you please, sir."

Fortunately the trees were bare and permitted sufficient starlight to come through to define a little footpath. On a summer night, Dale reflected, it would have been impossible to follow such a trail without the aid of a lantern. Antonio went ahead, silent as a shadow. Dale, wondering where in the world the path was taking them, kept close at his guide's heels.

After about ten minutes' walking—necessarily slow lest a frozen twig snap or a branch break and give a warning—they came to a clearing. On the farther side was a small house, dark and still as the woods. Antonio crept forward until he had almost reached the door.

Suddenly he raised his hand. Dale, close behind him, stopped. Antonio turned toward a shuttered window and put his ear to a crack. Dale did the same.

Distinctly he could hear the footfalls of some one moving in the room inside.

The footfalls continued; were a steady beat, as if some one were pacing the floor.

No light came through the shutters. But some one was certainly marching up and down, up and down, in that room.

Dale touched Antonio's shoulder and looked a question. Antonio shrugged.

"Well," thought Dale, "those aren't Clarice's footsteps. They're much too heavy for hers." But he felt how strange, how peculiar were these sounds, long after midnight, in this desolate house to which Pryde's servant had led him.

Antonio stole from the window and went on around the building. Dale kept close beside him, and together they came to the other side of the house. Here was a lighted window, without shutters, and from a safe distance they looked into the room.

A man, small and wizened, sat close to a Franklin stove. At a little distance sat a woman, gray-haired and thin. And on the table that held the lighted lamp lay a revolver. The furniture was mean and shabby, the couple were evidently poor and pinched in living. But what struck Dale immediately as he looked at the pair was that the man was on the watch for something and that the woman was furtively regarding him.

It was safe to whisper at this distance. "Well," murmured Dale, "what's going on here?"

"I thought Miss Pryde would be here," Antonio answered in the same tone.

"She's not?"

Antonio shrugged. "It's a man in that other room. No, I don't think Miss Pryde is there."

"Look."

The man by the stove had risen and crossed the room to the door. He appeared to be listening. He shook his head and came back to his chair.

"Rum-looking fellow," Antonio whispered. "I know the type. He'd do anything for a handful of silver."

"They're afraid of something, those two. See the revolver," Dale muttered.

"They've a prisoner in the house. That's why they're sitting there. And the old woman doesn't like it. . . . She's better than her man."

"But Miss Pryde, Antonio, Miss Pryde! What's all this business got to do with her? I don't care what these people are up to. Why did you bring me out here?"

"I don't know what it has to do with her, Mr. Dale. I thought this was the place to look. . . . There now, the man's up again. Watch out, sir. Something might happen."

Something was happening in the lighted room. The man was shaking his forefinger angrily at the woman, who shrank back in her chair and attempted no reply to whatever he was saying. Then the man picked up the revolver and after again haranguing his companion for a moment shuffled toward the door. Again he seemed to be listening; but this time, instead of shaking his head and returning, he thrust the door open and disappeared.

"Is he going after his prisoner?" Dale whispered. "It looks to me as if we'd better interfere before he goes too far."

"Sh-ssh," warned Antonio, and catching Dale's sleeve drew the latter into the shelter of a thick bush close to the wall of the house.

Antonio's ears were keen. He had caught the creak of the front door. In a moment the two watchers saw the man come around the corner, and look in their direction, then scan the open space as far as the woods. Apparently satisfied, he turned his back, and gazed with the same intentness in the opposite direction.

The next act in the drama came with lightning speed. Antonio flashed across the space and caught the man by the shoulder. A quick jerk, a snarl of pain,—and the revolver fell to the ground. Antonio had the man by the throat, and backed him against the wall.

Dale secured the revolver and then satisfied himself

that the man had no other weapons in his clothes. That done, Antonio faced his prisoner about, cautioning him that any show of resistance or outcry would bring instant retribution, and marched him around the corner and in at the front door.

“Go into the lighted room,” Antonio ordered.

The man fumbled at a door-knob. Antonio gave him a shove. Into the room with the lamp the three entered single-file. The woman gave a little gasp of amazement, then sat back, her eyes almost popping from her head.

“Sit down,” said Antonio.

The man obeyed. There was no fight in him. He was scared.

“What’s become of the young woman who was here to-night?” Antonio demanded.

“I don’t know,” the man answered.

Dale looked at the woman. “Was there a young woman here?” he asked.

“I didn’t know there was, sir,” came the faltering reply.

“Tell us what you do know,” Dale commanded.

“There were some people here, sir. I didn’t know there was a lady.” The woman cast frightened eyes at the man in the chair. “You didn’t say there was a lady, John. Oh, why did you ever do such a thing?”

“I didn’t mean her no harm,” whined the man. “I

didn't mean no harm to anybody. I only did what I was told."

"What's become of the people who were here?" Dale demanded.

The man shook his head. "They went away again."

Dale turned to the old woman. "We're looking for some one who's in great danger,—a young woman who has disappeared to-night. We think she was brought here. Can't you help us to find her? Don't you know something about it? If it's a matter of money, I'll pay whatever you ask."

"I don't want your money, sir." The old woman had risen; now she stepped up to the man. "Shame on you, John Hendricks! Men can look out for themselves, but to mistreat a girl! What have you done with the lady? Is it she you've got locked in that room?"

"Give me the key, quick!" Antonio had his revolver in his hand.

Hendricks fumbled in a pocket, and brought out a small key.

"Take it, Mr. Dale. See who's there. I'll watch these two," said Antonio.

Dale seized the key, crossed the hall, and unlocked the door opposite.

Out from the room came a man.

"Ralph Miles!" cried Dale in amazement.

“It’s you, Dale? Thank God! Have you got Clarice?”

“She was here then?”

But without wasting further words Miles went into the other room. He took in the scene at a glance. “You’ve got that rat!” he exclaimed. “Make him tell what’s happened to Clarice. She was here. I’ll swear she was here. Antonio, make him speak!”

But the old woman spoke first. “Maybe she’s at the house by the road. I shouldn’t wonder. John, is that where she is?”

“I don’t know,” mumbled the man. “All I was to do was to look out for any who came after them. I don’t know where she is.” He cringed at the angry faces. “No, sirs, I don’t; I don’t know anything.”

Dale broke in on his protestations. “Take us to this place,” he said to the woman. “Antonio, bring Hendricks along.” And clutching his revolver Dale, followed by Miles, hurried out from the door.

XIX

RESCUED

WITHOUT the aid of the woman Dale and Miles would, in all likelihood, never have been able to find the right path to take through the maze of the woods. The man Hendricks, cowed though he had been by Antonio's sudden onslaught, would have been quite capable of leading them by blind alleys so far afield that it would have taken them hours even to return to his house. But his wife was a different sort of person. Whether she expected that her help now might atone for his past misdoing, or whether she was moved by compassion to succor a woman in peril was needless to inquire into; she put herself at once into the position of guide.

Starlight revealed the clearing and the fringe of forest that, from the door of the house, seemed simply a black ring. Mrs. Hendricks, without a word, hastened across toward a clump of trees that Dale recognized as standing on the opposite side of the open space from where Antonio and he had entered.

There was a path through the woods, but so little light came into it that it was only by keeping directly

behind the woman that Dale was able to proceed. Close back of him came Miles, and then Hendricks and Antonio, and so near were they to one another that when the guide stopped to take her bearings the men jostled each other.

For a quarter of a mile, more or less, they went through this labyrinth, and then emerged on an old, and apparently little used, road. There were wheel-ruts, frozen hard, and the forest on either hand. Dale and Miles stepped up beside the woman, who, still without saying a word, turned to the right and went on more rapidly.

Under the winter night sky the place seemed incredibly lonely, incredibly far removed from human habitation. The wind moaned through the woods and sent little armies of dry leaves scurrying along gullies. And then, after another ten minutes or so, the woman halted and pointed to the left.

Dale saw the dim shape of a house, with a light at a lower window.

"That's the place I meant," said the woman.

"All right," Dale answered. He turned to Antonio. "You keep these two here. Miles and I will go on."

Cautiously they crept up to the house, came to the window, and looked in. A candle burned on a table, and showed that the room was empty.

"We'll try the door," muttered Dale.

“Look out!” cautioned Miles.

The door was locked; but neither the lock nor hinges seemed secure. Dale turned the handle, worked it back and forth noiselessly.

“We can break it in,” he whispered. “Now then, Miles ——”

One crash against the old wood and the rusted lock gave way. The door, broken from one hinge, swung inward with a splintered rending. The two men stepped into the room. And at the same moment there appeared in the opposite doorway the tall figure of Tyrrel.

Tyrrel held a revolver; but Dale shot first.

Tyrrel’s right arm fell, and he staggered against the wall. Before he could recover himself, Miles had Tyrrel’s weapon.

“Where’s Clarice?” said Dale.

From the inner room came a voice.

“She’s perfectly safe,” said Tyrrel. “On my honor, gentlemen ——

Clarice came through the doorway.

Dale went up and put his arm about her. “Thank God! Thank God!” he murmured. “You’re safe!”

“Oh, Clement!”

He led her to a chair and made her sit down. She was quivering and cold; he took her hands and held them in both of his,

“Well, Tyrrel?” said Miles.

“Mr. Dale has taken a piece out of my shoulder,” said Tyrrel. “I can’t imagine why he should do such a thing.” He walked across to a three-legged stool by a small deal table and seated himself.

“Clement”—Clarice’s eyes were fixed on Dale’s;—“Clement, that man has been trying all night to force me to marry him. That man—Ambrose Tyrrel!”

“Never mind, never mind now, dear. We’ll attend to him presently.”

“He brought me here from Hillcrest,” Clarice continued, her eyes blazing with anger. “He had me gagged and bound. He and his chauffeur took me through the woods. And he said that unless I married him in the morning he would take me away,—out of the country. Imagine a man talking like that to a woman like me!”

“Never mind, never mind,” said Dale. “He’s come to the end of his rope now.”

“And he was Uncle Melchior’s friend! Oh, I couldn’t believe it! I couldn’t believe it, even when he had me in that room and told me what he would do!”

Tyrrel, apparently paying no regard to Clarice’s indignant words, looked in the direction of Miles. “Will you pour me a glass of water from that pitcher on the shelf?” he asked. “My shoulder hurts abominably.”

Miles gave him a savage glance. Then, with a grunt, he went to the shelf, filled a glass of water, and set it on the table by Tyrrel.

"Thanks." Tyrrel took a sip. "And now, gentlemen," he remarked, "I assure you, as I did at first, that Miss Pryde is none the worse for her night's adventure."

The coolness of the unmasked villain was more than Miles could stand. He swung around, his eyes gleaming. "Maybe Miss Pryde is not," he said. "But what about Wykoff and Nelson?"

Dale did not let go of Clarice's hands; but he too looked at Tyrrel. Clarice also, and for the first time since she had come into the room, turned her eyes on the man who sat on the three-legged stool, his left arm propped on his knee and his body bent forward.

In spite of the pain from his shoulder Tyrrel managed to smile, to show something of his old pleasant manner. "I admit that I did want to make Miss Pryde my wife," he said; "and I think, if she had consented, that my good friend Melchior might not have been displeased. But I see nothing in that to lead any one to suppose that I harmed either Jay or Lombard. Why should any one think I did?"

"To make sure of Mr. Pryde's fortune," Dale answered. "You thought you were sure of it when you

were in Italy—you had twined yourself about him, and made yourself indispensable to him. But when you came over here you saw that all your plans were likely to be upset; and so you tried to drive him away in horror from all his relations. You got rid of most of them, in one crooked way or another; but you saw that he would never lose faith in Miss Pryde. Therefore you determined to marry her. His niece and his old friend would be sure of his fortune.”

“Clement, do you think that is so?” Clarice exclaimed.

“What kind of creature are you?” Miles, his hands in his pockets, as if to keep from using them on the prisoner, stormed at the stooping man.

“Very much like the rest of you, no doubt,” answered Tyrrel, still suavely. “You all wanted Melchior’s money.” His glance rested on Clarice. “And now, I fancy, the beloved niece will get it. Well, as a matter of justice, I think she’s the best entitled to it. She’s played fair.”

“What a mean, what a horrible, thought!” Clarice stood up, her hand on Dale’s arm. “How can we talk of such things?”

“You’re right about her,” said Miles. “Clarice is the best of us all. And yet, knowing how fine she is, you dared to treat her as you have to-night! Oh, you beastly ——”

"Don't;—please, please don't, Ralph! Remember he's wounded. Clement ——"

"Yes?"

"Take me away from here."

"Antonio's outside. My car is down in the woods. Miles, will you watch him here?"

A nod from Miles. Dale led Clarice to the broken door, and out into the starlight.

Antonio, John Hendricks and his wife were in the road. Briefly Dale told them what had happened. Then leaving Clarice with Antonio and the woman, he ordered Hendricks to pilot him through the woods back to the place where he had left his car.

Under Hendricks' directions Dale drove to a fork farther on and turned up into the old road that led to the house they had left. He helped Clarice to a seat in the car and wrapped a rug about her.

"A word to Miles and Antonio," he said, "and I'll have you back safe at Hillcrest in no time at all."

With Antonio he went to the house, through the open door of which the light made a splash on the road.

"I'll send a car back for you," Dale said to Miles. "Antonio will stay with you."

Miles, sitting in a chair, nodded. "I left Uncle Mel's car in the main road. But you'd better send another. This man won't get away, I'll promise."

Antonio looked at the prisoner. Tyrrel had slumped forward, so that he now appeared to have fallen sideways on the table. Antonio walked over toward him, and bending, touched Tyrrel's shoulder.

"He got a wound in the arm," Miles said.

Antonio bent lower; then with an exclamation straightened up. "No," he said, "it's not that. Poison."

He pointed to an empty glass, the one that Miles had filled with water.

The other two men were at his side now. They looked from the huddled figure to the glass near the edge of the table.

Then Antonio pointed to a ring on Tyrrel's finger. It was a seal ring, and the top of the seal was open. "Yes," said Antonio, "he took poison. He carried it in that ring. I've seen such things before in my country."

"I thought I had my eyes on him every minute," muttered Miles.

Antonio nodded. "So you might have. But he took the glass in his left hand and dropped something out of that ring as he lifted it to his lips. You might have been watching his every movement, and not have seen him do it. He was very quick with his hands, as I've often noticed."

A few minutes later Antonio turned to Dale.

“ Yes,” he said, “ he was a strange man. He spent too much time studying the crimes of the old Italian nobles, crimes that were done back in the Dark Ages. I always thought no good could come of knowing so much about them. And now, Mr. Dale, I’d suggest that you drive Miss Pryde directly back to her uncle’s.”

XX

A STRANGE HISTORY

THE afternoon sun was warm, and there was a hint of spring in the air that had induced Clarice and Dale and Miles to go for a stroll in the garden at Hillcrest after Saturday lunch. Melchior Pryde was resting, though he had now entirely recovered from the indisposition that had brought his niece hastily back from Baltimore two weeks before. As the three walked in the garden Clarice explained what she intended to plant in the various flower-beds, while Dale made occasional suggestions, his eyes continually on the fair face that was regaining its bloom.

When they returned to the house they were loath to go indoors, and so settled themselves in the glassed-in sun-parlor at the end of the terrace. And there Miles, lighting a cigarette and cocking one knee comfortably over the other, turned the conversation from botanical subjects to a topic that interested him far more.

"Clement, didn't you suspect that Antonio was mixed up in this business? I'm free to admit that I did. That time when I went to see you I felt pretty certain that he knew much more than he'd told."

Dale glanced at Clarice, a question in his eyes.

"Oh, I don't mind your talking about it," she assented readily. "We know what a trump Antonio really was."

"Well," said Dale, "I'll own that I was puzzled. I couldn't understand what relation there was between Antonio and Amory Harper. I told you about seeing them in the drawing-room that time when Harper gave Antonio money. And then Antonio was so positive he had seen Nelson Lombard up-stairs that first evening. I believed that Harper had bribed him to tell that story. I think now that Harper was afraid all along that Lombard might do him some harm and was paying Antonio to keep an eye on him."

"Antonio did prove a trump, as Clarice says," Miles admitted; "but he certainly mixed black and white streaks at first. He was playing some sort of a game."

Dale's glance roamed to the park in reflection. "Yes, I believe Antonio's motives were mixed," he said presently. "He perjured himself. He didn't like Nelson. He was in Harper's pay, and he thought that anything he could do that would harm Nelson would please his employer. But that was all before he began to suspect Tyrrel of making use of that drug. From the minute he hit on that idea his one thought was to get at the truth. That accounts for his secret

visits to the wine-cellar and his interest in the brandy glasses. And from that time he played straight. He wanted to catch Tyrrel red-handed."

"Yes, he watched Tyrrel indoors and out," said Miles. "That's how he came to know about the house in the woods. He overheard Tyrrel talking to a taxi-driver one day, and what he heard made him suspicious, and he hired a boy with a car he found in the road and followed Tyrrel out there. He even went up to Hendricks' house and saw Tyrrel talking to that rascal."

"Yes," nodded Dale, "Antonio has told me about that. Suspecting Tyrrel as he did, he thought he was up to some underhand business in going to that lonely place. Antonio has a good head on his shoulders. Hence that map he made. He's shrewd, too. He wouldn't so much as hint that he suspected Tyrrel the night he drove me out there. He knew he might be wrong; and then he'd have been in a very unpleasant position. You see you had disappeared from Hillcrest that same night, Ralph."

Miles frowned. "Not very complimentary, that. To think I'd be apt to kidnap my own cousin. However, as things were, I don't wonder we each of us mistrusted every one else. I left the house after dinner. I took Uncle Mel's car and drove over to Billy Wharton's. I'd just come back and was going round

to the garage when I saw another car come sliding around from the back of this house. It was heading in the other direction. I didn't understand what a strange car was doing here, so I called to the driver. He didn't pay any attention to me, and that made me suspicious. But I've told you about all that;—how I followed the car. . . . I've got a stubborn streak that won't let me give up a chase. . . . And when I saw that car stop in that desolate woodland and saw two men help out a woman—why, I'd have gone on anywhere to find out what they were doing. Well, I followed all right, and got a blow over the head from that fellow Hendricks for my pains, and the first thing I knew I was a prisoner. By that time I hadn't a doubt that the woman in the car was Clarice."

"Tyrrel paid the man to watch and see if any one followed him," said Dale. "Hendricks says his orders were to see that no one got by. And Hendricks thinks that Tyrrel sent his own driver away, with orders to come back next morning." Dale looked at Clarice. "But that's all over and done with, thank Heaven! Let's talk of pleasanter things."

"Yes, Clement," said Clarice. "And yet there are several things I would like to understand. Did you ever suspect Ambrose Tyrrel?"

Dale frowned. "I think I suspected every man in the house at one time or another,—at least I studied

each one. Tyrrel? Yes, in a way. You remember he said that he heard the clock strike in the writing-room while he was there on the night when Wykoff was killed? I was in that room several days later, and the clock didn't strike the hour. I wondered about that, and I asked Bramwell if any clock was in need of repairs. He said that he hadn't heard of it. But on reflection it seemed to me impossible that a man like Tyrrel could be such a villain. . . . No, I thought Antonio was more likely to be the criminal. And then I began to get interested in drugs, such drugs as would have the effects of inducing anger and then weakness. I talked to a chemist about them, and I tried to find out whether there was any record of such drugs in Italy. But though I had various suspicions, I knew that I hadn't any evidence that was in the least reliable. And even now we don't know exactly what it was that Tyrrel dropped in the brandy. As Antonio says, Tyrrel had made a deep study of strange potions and drugs."

"And all the time we thought him so devoted to Uncle Mel!" sighed Clarice.

"The strangest mixture of man I ever met or heard of!" exclaimed Miles. "For undoubtedly he had all the marks of a gentleman."

"He was a gentleman once, I suppose," mused Dale, "and he had an exceptionally keen and resourceful

mind. But, as Antonio implied, ' Evil communications corrupt good manners,' and Tyrrel became too familiar with mediæval crimes. I picture him as fascinated by the subtle sins of noble Italians of Machiavelli's day who wanted to get rid of rivals or of women they had grown tired of. Probably he would have confined his attention strictly to study and not to practice had not fate brought him here with Mr. Pryde. But here he saw that in all likelihood he would lose his hold over his friend and his chance of inheriting a good-sized share of Mr. Pryde's fortune. He saw at once that Mr. Pryde liked his nephews and nieces. Tyrrel realized,—for he was quick to size up human nature,—that he might play off various members of the family against one another, and bring about situations that, to say the least, would be extremely disagreeable to the uncle. That gave him his first idea,—dissension in the family that would displease Mr. Pryde and might perhaps drive him back to his Italian villa, where Tyrrel would again reign supreme in his regard. As he considered that, he took a step further. If a crime were committed, that would not only increase the dissension, but would very probably make it impossible for Mr. Pryde to stay at Hillcrest. Tyrrel had no scruples concerning crime; he may have regarded it as a natural method to achieve a wanted result; he was not in the least concerned that another man might bear the bur-

den of responsibility for a crime he had himself committed."

"How dreadfully evil!" murmured Clarice. "And yet, Clement, we know he wouldn't stop at anything!"

"Antonio helped him at first," Dale continued. "He didn't know what was in Tyrrel's mind, but he told him what he overheard and saw. Antonio knew a good deal, and so did Tyrrel. Somehow Tyrrel got on to the fact that there was a quarrel between Wykoff Jay and Hamilton Fount that Sunday afternoon. He may have been listening in the closet when they had their talk—when Jay asked Fount to lend him money. And Tyrrel, looking for just such a chance as that, was all prepared to act. He contrived that Jay should drink the drugged glass of brandy. I imagine that he himself handed Jay the glass."

"That would have been easy," put in Miles. "We were all moving around the dining-room."

"Then," said Dale, "Tyrrel went to the writing-room and was busy there when Fount stopped for a moment on his way up-stairs. The coast clear, Tyrrel acted fast. He went to the storeroom, and from there by the trap-door to the roof. His plans were made; he had been in the library some time earlier, pushed the big globe away from the closet door and unfastened the bolt in the closet skylight. He had placed the step-ladder where he wanted it. Now he crossed the roof,

came down into the library closet, and heard the quarrel between Jay and Fount."

Dale smoked his pipe in silence a moment, while Clarice and Miles waited eagerly for him to continue.

"Well, the rest was very simple. Jay fell on the hearth, and Fount, frightened, stole out of the room. Tyrrel went in and struck Jay's head against the tiles. Then he returned to the closet, and so again by the roof to the other part of the house. He need only have been away from the writing-room a few minutes."

"And there would have been absolutely no trace of what he had done in the library," said Miles.

"No," said Dale, "there would have been a trace, if any one had known where to look. The globe would have been pushed away from the closet door and the bolt unfastened in the skylight—he couldn't have replaced either of those things at the moment. But he did attend to them soon after. I imagine he replaced the globe against the door and possibly rebolted the trap while you were all in the room, trying to find some clue to what had happened. It would have been easy for him to do that. In the general excitement no one would be watching him."

Miles nodded. "Yes. I know I didn't pay any attention to what he was doing at the time."

"And the beauty of it all from Tyrrel's standpoint," Dale pointed out, "was that suspicion was almost cer-

tain to fall on some one else—in that case, on Hamilton Fount. Mr. Pryde would suspect Fount, and that was what Tyrrel wanted. It wasn't enough for him simply to make away with Wykoff,—to poison him, for instance. What he wanted to do—and what he did—was to arrange the setting so that it seemed as if some one else, and some one with a sufficient motive, had full opportunity to commit the crime.”

“And Uncle Melchior did suspect Hamilton,” said Clarice. “I know he did, though he didn't say anything to me about it.”

“However,” Dale went on, “Tyrrel saw that he hadn't done enough. He hadn't yet succeeded in driving Mr. Pryde away. Then he realized the situation between Harper and Nelson Lombard. He waited, and after a time the opportunity he was looking for came. He heard Nelson ask Harper to meet him in the library after dinner. That was enough for Tyrrel. He had the drug ready, and he contrived that Lombard should drink it. He saw Lombard go up the stairs. Tyrrel went into the writing-room and sat down before the fire. But he didn't sit there long. He fixed a cushion in the chair, and laid a coat over it,—he could have got a coat from the hall-closet,—and arranged it so that a sleeve hung down over the chair-arm. Harper told me he saw Tyrrel's arm when he passed the door. The room was only lighted by the fire,

but I took it for granted, from what Harper said, that Tyrrel was actually there. I see now that he must have fixed a dummy. And meantime he went over the roof again and down into the library and when Harper left the room Tyrrel stole in and stabbed Lombard. He got rid of the weapon later. We didn't find it among his things."

There followed a silence, broken at length by Miles. "And he'd have treated me in the same way, if Clarice hadn't refused to leave me alone in that room."

"I think that was what Tyrrel intended," Dale assented. "He saw that his scheme was working. He had alienated most of the family. The Founts and the Harpers had gone. But he hadn't reached his goal yet; Mr. Pryde still stuck to Hillcrest. He thought that one more crime like the others would win him what he wanted. He would be rid of you, and of Kelley at the same time, for Kelley would surely be suspected." Dale nodded, and then, as if recollecting something pertinent and of interest, he gave his knee a slap. "That reminds me. You remember, Clarice, that on the evening of Ralph's mishap I talked with you and your uncle in the drawing-room? You said that after dinner Tyrrel played something for you on the piano, but that you were restless and excused yourself and left the room. And your uncle said that as he sat at the dinner-table he heard Tyrrel playing in

the drawing-room. Well, I looked about the room and I saw a Victrola. I've wondered if it was that that Mr. Pryde heard. Tyrrel was clever in arranging alibis. At the moment he might have been up on the roof or in the library closet, watching Ralph and Kelley." Dale pondered over that idea; then added, "Yes, Ralph, I don't think there's any doubt that it was Clarice's quick wit that saved you that time."

Dale looked at Clarice, his eyes full of admiration.

"Oh, I felt that I couldn't leave him there—something told me I mustn't," said Clarice. "And then," she went on hastily, "after that, he turned his attention to me."

"He saw," Dale said, "that, no matter how he might succeed in alienating Mr. Pryde from the others, he couldn't alienate him from you. So he thought to force you into marrying him."

"He put the drug in my coffee cup."

"Yes," said Dale. "And I drank it. I think he knew that I had. I was sure that I saw the curtains at the door of the drawing-room move, and I believe he was watching me. Then he knew that he would have to take you by force, and he did when you came out from your uncle's room, when I was lying on the library floor. . . ." Dale made a gesture with his head. "I hate to think about that. I hate to think

what you suffered at his hands. Thank God, he failed!"

Again silence descended. Each of the three had much to think about; and now that the links in the chain were complete each was supplying recollections of corroborative facts in their own experience. Presently Clarice rose. "Let's go in and find Uncle Melchior. We oughtn't to leave him alone. Poor dear! What a time he's had!"

They found Mr. Pryde in the writing-room, busy with paper and ink. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, my dear children, come in and let me tell you my news. Josephine Fount has telephoned that Hamilton has come back. It seems there wasn't anything really wrong about his going; he simply couldn't stay with things as they were. . . . Josephine is so happy. It did me good just to hear the ring in her voice." He picked up a small note from his blotting-pad. "And here is a letter from Marian. She says that she and Amory are going to try it again—double harness, you know. We must help them all we can. . . . I think, perhaps,"—Pryde's gentle voice hesitated—"perhaps we all see things differently now."

"And Pip Kelley's coming to dinner to-night," said Clarice. "I have an idea he may be going to tell us something about a certain lady. He's been out of town, to the place where the lady lives."

“Good enough,” said Pryde. “Oh, I do want you youngsters to be happy! I’ve just written a line to Marian to say that I’ll take tea with her to-morrow.” He sealed his envelope and stamped it; then rang a little bell.

Immediately Antonio appeared.

“Ah, Antonio,” said Pryde, “you’re always where you’re wanted. Please have this note go at once.”

And as the servant left the room Pryde nodded. “There’s a perfect fellow for you! I tell you there isn’t another like him,—not even here in the United States.”

Pryde pushed his chair back from the table. “And now, Ralph, it would give me the greatest pleasure to beat you at a game of chess.”

Clarice waited until the game had started. Then she turned to Dale. “Will you go for a walk with me, Clement? I’d like to see the sunset from your hill.”

XXI

SPRING IN THE AIR

CLARICE and Dale followed the road that led toward Rockledge, but before they reached the gates of Dale's home they turned off to the right, taking a footpath across an open meadow to a rise of ground that Clarice had named "Clement's Hill." The sun, a great red-gold ball, was setting behind a tracery of purple-black, bare-limbed trees, and in the lowlands a light carpet of mist silvered the short winter grass.

Yet the vernal season was near; felt in the air, which was soft, and seen in the pearl-blue sky. Winter had come and was gone. And with it there had slipped from the man and woman that weight of responsibility they had carried so long.

Between two trees was an old bench. Clarice sat down and clasped her hands around her crossed knees. For some time she watched the descending sun in silence, while Dale, standing a little behind her, looked now at the silvered valley, now at the golden ball, but most of the time at her.

"What are you thinking of, Clement?"

Taken unawares, he answered, "Why, of the sunset

sky at the end of the street that evening we left Marian's house. Do you remember? It was so wonderfully brilliant."

"Clement, do you believe it's possible for Marian and Amory to be happy together?"

He stepped over the bench and sat down. "It seems to me that depends on how much they've learned from all this. I think we've all learned a good deal. Take Ralph, for instance. Haven't you noticed a change in him?"

The fair head nodded. "Yes. He treats Uncle Melchior differently now. Clement, I know we weren't all on the square with him."

"You were. As to the others —— Well, there's a good deal of selfishness mixed up in most of us. I think Marian has learned a lesson."

"But does knowledge make for happiness—between husband and wife, I mean?"

Dale smiled. "Clarice, how should I know? I'm only a lawyer, not a philosopher. And if you come to that, how much does a philosopher know?" Then suddenly he bent forward, reached out his hand and touched hers. "There's only one thing I can think of, Clarice—and that is you."

She didn't draw away, though she sat up straight and looked far over the trees.

"Clarice, we've been through a great deal together

since the day when you asked me to help your uncle.” Dale’s voice trembled a little. “Clarice—dear—you know I love you.”

She looked at him then, a tender, caressing look, and her fingers tightened on his. “You’re sure I’m not just the jolly companion you used to like?” she asked.

“You’re that;—but you’re more—much more! You’re so much more that you’re everything to me. I can’t get along without you.”

The soft eyes melted before his; she leaned toward him. “Nor I without you, dear. If you really must have me, take me.”

He took her in his arms and kissed her. He held her close a long time, kissing her and murmuring to her. The sun sank and the silver mist rose in the lowlands. Presently she drew away gently.

“We’re forgetting the time, dearest. We mustn’t be late to dinner.”

“I’ve forgotten everything but you. There isn’t anything else, my darling.”

She put her hand to her hat, to her hair, to straighten the one, to smooth the other. “Of course I know that there isn’t anything else really, dear. But we’ve got to pretend that Uncle Melchior is expecting us at Hillcrest.”

“All right. We’ll tell him to-night, directly after dinner.”

“What a hurry you are in!”

“I suppose I am,” Dale admitted. “But it’s natural, isn’t it, darling? I’ve hoped for this so long.”

He was not in too much of a hurry, however, when they stood up, to take her again in his arms, and hold her tight, forgetful of everything except that her love was his.

THE END

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